

IMPROVING PUBLIC HEALTH LITERACY WITH SECTOR-WIDE HEPATITIS C EDUCATION IN AUSTRALIAN PRISONS

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Background:

Australia is progressing well towards hepatitis C virus (HCV) elimination, with highly effective antiviral therapies available to all Australians, including prisoners. The high HCV prevalence and incidence in the prisons highlights an urgent need for treatment scale-up in this setting. Prison-based hepatitis service infrastructure is now mature, but only a minority of those eligible are being treated. Further initiatives are needed to overcome barriers to treatment scale-up.

The National Prisons Hepatitis Education Project aims to undertake a sector-wide approach to enhance *public health literacy* and thence treatment scale-up. A national needs assessment was conducted to understand the health literacy (knowledge; attitudes; capabilities) of the three target audiences (healthcare providers; correctional officers; prisoners). National steering committees were convened to support co-design of the educational resources and implementation plans.

Methods:

Mixed methods interviews were developed for key stakeholders and target audience members. The interviews (n=50 planned) are nearing completion (n=40 to date). Steering committees (one for each target audience group) have completed three rounds of consultation.

Results:

In the stakeholder interviews, 85-89% of respondents considered the health literacy of the hepatitis healthcare workforce to be in the 'good-very good' range, in contrast to 'adequate-good' in the non-hepatitis skilled healthcare workforce (e.g. GPs, psychiatrists). Correctional officers were generally considered in the 'poor-adequate' range across all domains. Prisoners' health literacy was considered more varied, with overall inadequate knowledge and negative attitudes, but good capacity to access to hepatitis services (52% 'good-very good'). Stigma surrounding HCV was reported as a major barrier. Steering committees have recommended prison-focused content using innovative multi-media resources, including peer education, and a comprehensive evaluation.

Conclusion:

There is a clear rationale for the National Prisons Hepatitis Education Project, and well-informed design is underway. The program will be implemented across prisons nationally and evaluated for impact on treatment uptake.

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