

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING HEPATITIS C TREATMENT AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS

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Background:

Many people who use drugs (PWUDs) are reluctant to access Direct Acting Antiviral (DAA) treatment for HCV under the false belief that they need to be drug free to commence treatment. This perceived barrier is compounded by the negative reception PWUDs often experience when accessing traditional health care settings. The study aims to ascertain people's knowledge of HCV, access to HCV treatment and experiences navigating the health care solutions available to them.

Description of model of care/intervention:

Between 01/23/2023 and 02/15/2023 35 semi structured interviews were conducted at Syringe Service Program (SSP) outreach sessions in Atlanta, Georgia USA. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their knowledge of HCV, treatment and experiences accessing treatment through available health care provision. All respondents received snacks/syringes as incentive to participate in the study.

Results:

Most respondents stated that they “felt uncomfortable,” “anxious “or chose not to see a traditional health care provider. Those who did attend said that they “felt judged” and “stigmatized” about their substance use. Many believed ‘people who do not use drugs were given priority over them”. One respondent stated they had “a good experience” but this was dependent on the provider they saw. More than half of respondents were unaware that they did not need to be sober before commencing treatment or that treatment can be free.

Conclusion:

PWUDs continue to be stigmatized when accessing traditional health care settings. Most respondents stated that they would have preferred to get their treatment outside of a traditional healthcare environment. Harm reduction providers should be encouraged to include treatment in their range of service provisions. There remains a lack of knowledge among PWUDs as to the access criteria, cost, and the efficacy of treatment. Services providing treatment should actively engage with PWUDs to widen access to life saving treatment.