

# UNDERSTANDING EFFECTIVE DISSEMINATION OF KNOWLEDGE REGARDING HCV SCREENING AND TREATMENT AMONG 20-39-YEAR-OLDS WHO USE DRUGS IN NEW BRUNSWICK, CANADA

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## Background

Substance use among Canadians in their child-bearing years is rising resulting in year-over-year increases in hepatitis C (HCV) incidence. In 2017 the number of cases of HCV was 247, with the proportion of total cases for persons 20-39 years of age being approximately 56.3% (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2017). However, in 2011, there were an estimated 44% of people infected with HCV who did not know their status (Trubnikov et al., 2014).

Knowledge dissemination strategies about screening and treatment for HCV are often shared among jurisdictions, but the process of accessing this information by persons who use drugs (PWUD) is not well known in New Brunswick. As programs for screening and engagement are often developed and implemented without input from PWUD, our intent was to use data and input from this population in the develop of a local program to increase awareness for HCV screening and treatment.

## Objectives

The aim of the overarching study was to understand the barriers and facilitators for PWUD aged 20-39 years old in seeking screening and treatment for HCV.

The objectives for this phase of the study were to:

- understand the knowledge of, and access to, HCV testing and treatment; and,
- explore methods of advertising to reach the target population

## Methods

Our overarching study was a robust qualitative design intended to explore the processes on how PWUD sought screening and treatment for HCV. The study was informed by Charmaz's (2010, 2014) constructivist grounded theory and included interviews based on a semi-structured question guide that yielded much data on the types of information participants accessed and how they sought information on HCV. Data collection consisted of recorded interviews that were transcribed verbatim.

The method described by Charmaz includes line-by-line *Initial Coding* that is similar to content coding that Braun and Clarke (2006) use for content and thematic analysis. We used this approach to identify strategies and considerations for developing a health promotion and education program tailored to PWUD.

## Inclusion Criteria

Participants were included in the study if they:

- were 20 to 39 years old;
- used substances by injection or snorting; and,
- either had an unknown HCV status since last risk behaviour or were known to be HCV positive but were not engaged in care.

## Participant Characteristics

- Number of Participants: 28
- Age: Mean age 30.5 years (Range 20-39 years)
- Place of Residence: Charlotte County (22%), Kings County (14%), and Saint John County (64%)
- Sex: 39% (n = 11) female and 61% (n=17) male
- Drug Use: 78.9% were currently using drugs
- HCV Status: 89.3% **did not** know their HCV status

"If [PWUDs are] who you're trying to get, internet...no, phones...no, they're selling their phones, selling their computers, they have no access to any of this stuff. This is not it" - A, age 29

"Word of mouth, it always goes back to word of mouth because like I'm barely ever on the internet ...like I go on Facebook, I post a bunch of random crap and then I leave Facebook for like a month" - S, age 27

"Our community would benefit most from just like some place that you could go in and talk to somebody and if you didn't want to talk to somebody you could go there and get a pamphlet...just a place that's safe for you to talk" - C, age 30

## Results

Themes	Suggested Strategies
Poster and Pamphlet Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>When preparing materials, ensure a balance of wording and pictures that resonate with target audience</li> <li>Ensure posters and pamphlets are available at a variety of places where target audience receive services (e.g. pharmacies)</li> </ul>
Word of Mouth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Utilize peers to help disseminate information</li> <li>Ensure healthcare providers and agencies have required information on screening and treatment</li> </ul>
Social Media and Internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Stories are helpful; use the experiences of PWUD who have the disease and received treatment</li> <li>Ensure use of reputable/dependable sites for dissemination of information</li> </ul>

"Maybe put some pamphlets in different places where they're not normally at,...every pharmacy or even some certain stores" - N, age 37

## Conclusion

Given a younger age demographic, it was somewhat surprising that social media and, to a lesser extent, the internet were explicitly cited as poor ways to disseminate information. These findings are critical to the development of effective strategies to inform and engage PWUD regarding HCV screening and treatment. Data from this phase of the study is the basis for the design of a 12-month patient-informed HCV Engagement Program to be implemented and evaluated in New Brunswick.

## Implementation of Findings

The results of this study have been used to inform the creation of a patient-informed hepatitis C engagement strategy which began in July 2019. Actions using these results include:

- Ensuring that RECAP's website with information on testing and treatment comes up on the first page of search results when using common Google search terms including: "Hepatitis C testing Saint John", "Hepatitis C treatment New Brunswick", "Hepatitis C New Brunswick", "Hepatitis C Saint John", and "Addiction and hepatitis C Saint John".
- Widespread distribution of simple, captivating posters and handouts in advance to outreach clinics in places familiar to, and often frequented by, our target population.
- In the process of instituting an incentive program where individuals receive a small amount of money for being screened and, by spreading the word to others in their network, can get an additional amount for each person they refer who presents for screening.

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