THE FUTURE OF HEP C CARE FOR PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS: LESSONS FROM A COMMUNITY-BASED, HARM REDUCTION, CLIENT-DRIVEN PROGRAM IN TORONTO, CANADA

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Abstract:

This presentation will be a reflection on 10 years of providing Hep C treatment and support to marginalized drug users. The Toronto Community Hep C Program began as a support group in the basement of a small community-based organization and is now a multi-disciplinary program offering treatment, education and support at three different primary health care centres in Toronto, with similar models replicated across Ontario. The program was initiated in response to the stigma and discrimination faced by people who use drugs in their attempt to access treatment and information about Hep C. Despite Canada's system of universal health care and treatment guidelines that no longer exclude substance users, a recent survey of Canadian specialists reported that only 20% would provide Hep C treatment to a current injection drug user. In Toronto specifically, where crack is the most commonly used illicit substance other than marijuana, this would likely be even lower. Crack users face significant barriers to health care and other services, including: discrimination, social isolation, trauma and poverty. The Toronto Community Hep C Program is grounded in the principles of harm reduction, popular education, mutual aid, community development, and the involvement of people with lived experience of Hep C. At the heart of the program is a psycho-education support group that runs concurrently with the Hep C treatment clinic, delivered by primary care providers with integrated specialist support. Studies of the TCHCP model have demonstrated treatment initiation and success rates which are comparable to those in tertiary health care settings. This presentation will provide an overview of the program history, model, as well as the challenges of working within a conservative political environment and in the absence of a national Hepatitis C strategy.