

UTILISING SOCIAL CAPITAL TO PROMOTE HCV TREATMENT IN PRISON

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Background: Hepatitis C (HCV) infection is a major public health problem in prisons, with an estimated HCV-antibody prevalence of 26%. Despite availability of HCV treatment while in custody, treatment uptake remains low (<1% of those eligible). This study utilises social capital theory to explore influences on inmates' decisions to access HCV treatment. Social capital is an accumulation of social networks, social cohesion, and social support. Social capital encompasses bonding (groups with shared interests or similarities), bridging (connections with other groups), and linking (connections with institutions) dimensions, and has been shown to correlate with health and access to health services.

Methods: Thirty male inmates were interviewed across three correctional centres in NSW, including two regional prisons and one urban. All participants were HCV RNA positive.

Results: Social capital was found to be a valuable social resource for inmates considering and undergoing HCV treatment whilst in custody. Fellow inmates were a source for information, including personal accounts of undergoing treatment and reassurance ("bonding social capital"). Nurses were regarded as important for the provision of information and care ("linking social capital"). However, trustworthiness of nurses (as perceived by inmates) was critical in the access of healthcare. Additionally, participants identified a lack of engagement by nurses and health educators outside of the clinic and described ways in which health promotion would best be delivered to the prison community to enhance awareness and interest in HCV treatment.

Conclusion: The current health engagement approach was described by study participants as being reliant on inmates' agency to access clinics, rather than engagement initiated by health staff. Peers with treatment experience were able to provide information, support, and reassurance.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: The authors have no competing interests to declare.