

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF HEPATITIS C AND THE MULTIPLE BENEFITS OF 'CURE'

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Background: In March 2016 the Australian government funded universal access to direct-acting interferon-free antiviral drugs (DAAs). While it has been possible to 'cure' hepatitis C with interferon-based therapy for more than two decades, uptake has been low due to side-effects, the length of treatment and variable success rate related to genotype. DAAs with a shorter treatment course, few side effects and >95% success rate have the potential to eliminate hepatitis C in Australia.

The Liver Health project is a qualitative longitudinal study exploring the social and health factors associated with living with hepatitis C. This paper describes the experiences of living with hepatitis C and considers the potential effects of hepatitis C cure.

Method: A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 23 people diagnosed with hepatitis C. The interviews were conducted between July 2014 and May 2016. The interviews were transcribed, de-identified and key themes and patterns identified. Interviews for each participant were also analysed to identify changes over time.

Results: The theme of waiting was prominent, including waiting for diagnosis, symptoms, disease progression and for treatment. The majority of participants had been living with hepatitis C for over 20 years and while some had experienced significant health issues, for many hepatitis C was asymptomatic. Participants identified a range of social effects including fears about onward transmission, managing disclosure, unwanted reminder of past injecting, isolation from friendship networks and experiences of stigma and discrimination. The majority of participants were enthusiastic about DAAs however a small number were not yet convinced about their effectiveness.

Conclusions: These findings highlight the social dimensions of hepatitis C and their importance in understanding attitudes to, and experiences of, the biomedical aspects of hepatitis C, including treatment and cure. This focus is important in reaching asymptomatic individuals living with hepatitis C who are not linked to clinical care.