

PEER SUPPORT INCREASES ACCESS TO HEPATITIS C TREATMENT TO CARE IN DRUG AND ALCOHOL SETTINGS

Samuel Y¹, McNaughton T¹, Adey S¹, Harrod ME¹

¹ NSW Users and AIDS Association

Background: The new era of universal access to direct acting antiviral medications has ensured that treatment rates of people living with chronic hepatitis C are increasing as waitlisted patients are quickly engaging with clinics. However, equity demands that more marginalised populations are also supported to undergo treatment. Often the primary point of contact that highly marginalised individuals have with the health care setting is in harm reduction or opioid substitution clinics where they may previously have experienced highly stigmatised care. This paper described the work of a peer support/ worker (PSW) in a high volume public OST clinic in increasing access to hepatitis C treatment.

Methods: Peer support consists of a worker with lived experience of injecting drug use and hepatitis C working in treatment settings appropriate to their skill base. The NSW Users and AIDS Association upskilled a well-regarded consumer engagement officer in hepatitis C treatment and support. We undertook to evaluate the acceptability and efficacy of this intervention with 47 clients completing a survey.

Results: Clients were 75% male with 47% having been at the clinic for between 1-5 years. A very high percentage (87%) experienced the service as good to excellent. A high percentage of clients had engaged with the PSW over the previous year (75%) with 70% having received concrete help from the PSW and 77% feeling more engaged with services and receiving support in advocating with the clinic. The PSW had discussed hepatitis C with 30% of those surveyed – a much higher percentage than the doctor (20%) dispensing staff (10%) or hepatitis C nurse (5%).

Discussion: Peer support plays a valuable role in hepatitis C treatment access in OST settings. PSW roles must be considered in all high-volume OST clinics in order to ensure equity in hepatitis C treatment.

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