

RUSSIA: HEPATITIS C TREATMENT GAP AND WAYS FORWARD

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Estimated 5 million people in Russia are infected with hepatitis C virus (HCV). HCV especially affects people who inject drugs (PWID). Despite high prevalence and increasing incidence, access to treatment of hepatitis C remains limited. While the government acknowledges HCV as a socially significant disease, access to treatment remains highly restricted.

The main problems affecting low access are: lack of a Federal Program and targeted funds; lack of the clinical protocols and problems with the national patients registry. PWUD are most affected by HCV but they are routinely excluded from treatment due to doctors' belief that PWUD cannot adhere. At the same time, no adherence support structures are being developed, for example opiate substitution programs (OST) is still legally banned. High prices of treatment and absence of price reduction mechanisms, as well as lack of capacities of the treatment facilities, subjective patient selection criteria, low level of patients awareness and lack of community activism inhibit expansion of treatment provision.

In order to massively expand access to HCV treatment, Russia needs to address above-mentioned structural problems. PWUD have to be included into treatment programs and adherence system installed, including legalization of the OST for patients with opiate dependency. Cost reduction of medications could be achieved through a range of mechanisms including own generic production. Treatment demand should be scaled up through quality counseling, patient schools and wider information campaigns. Harm reduction projects have to be expanded to ensure timely diagnosis and involvement in treatment programs. Patient organizations and groups should actively advocate for increased access to treatment, including through strategic litigation and peer education.