

HEPATITIS C TESTING, CARE AND TREATMENT AT HARM REDUCTION CENTRES IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: A 28-COUNTRY SURVEY OF SERVICE PROVIDERS

Lazarus JV^{1,2}, Bromberg DJ¹, Schatz E³, Wawer I⁴, Wysocki P⁴, Safreed-Harmon K¹

¹Barcelona Institute for Global Health (ISGlobal), Hospital Clínic, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain; ²CHIP, Rigshospitalet, University of Copenhagen, Copenhagen, Denmark; ³Correlation Network, De Regenboog Groep, Amsterdam, the Netherlands; ⁴National AIDS Centre, Ministry of Health of Poland, Warsaw, Poland



BACKGROUND

Major international organizations, including UNAIDS, UNODC and WHO, recommend that viral hepatitis prevention, vaccination, diagnosis and treatment be available to people who inject drugs (PWID) as part of a comprehensive harm reduction package. In the context of the 2016 WHO Global Health Sector Strategy on Viral Hepatitis, and the recent introduction of direct-acting antivirals that can cure more than 95% of chronic hepatitis C virus (HCV) cases, the European Joint Action on HIV and Co-infection Prevention and Harm Reduction (HA-REACT) undertook a study to collect data on HCV testing, care and treatment from harm reduction service providers in the European Union (EU).

METHODS

In 2017, we invited 38 purposively-selected providers of harm reduction services for PWID in the 28 EU member states to complete a 26-item online survey addressing the availability, accessibility and funding of harm reduction services. Data were captured using the REDCap online survey platform. We extracted key HCV-related data and reported findings by country (n=29, as England and Scotland are reported separately) or responding organisation.

RESULTS

The response rate was 100% (Figure 1). Respondents from 22 countries reported that hepatitis C tests are offered by at least some harm-reduction services in their countries. Respondents from 7 countries reported that addiction specialists in their countries are able to prescribe HCV therapy. Just under half of respondents (45%) said that their respective organisations had established referral systems with hospitals or clinics that administer HCV treatment.



Figure 1. Participating European Union countries (N=28)

CONCLUSION

Eliminating hepatitis C requires a concerted effort targeting people who inject drugs. This study found that not all EU countries have harm reduction services that provide HCV tests, and that most harm reduction services that do offer such a test have not established referral systems with HCV treatment providers. Further, the reported lack of prescribing of HCV treatment by addiction specialists in many countries points to missed opportunities to make treatment more accessible.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Prof. Jeffrey V. Lazarus
CHIP, Rigshospitalet, University of Copenhagen
Oester Alle 56, 5th fl
DK-2100 Copenhagen Oe, Denmark
Jeffrey.Lazarus@regionh.dk
@JVLazarus #HAREACT

ABOUT HA-REACT

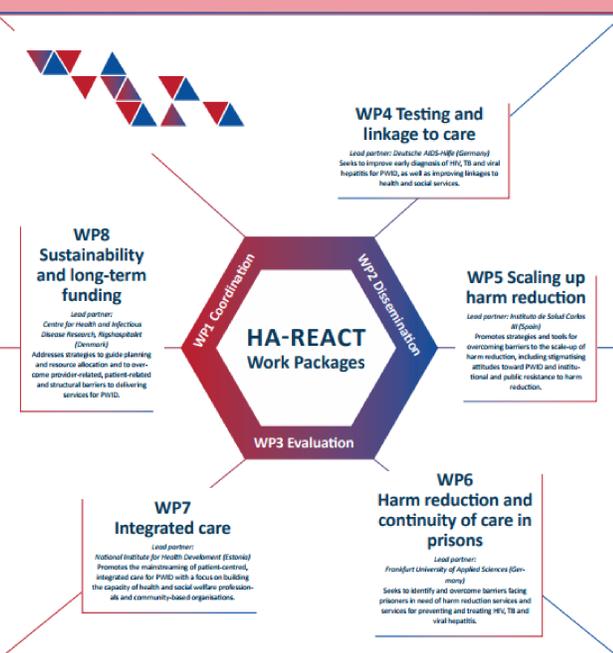
The Joint Action on HIV and Co-infection Prevention and Harm Reduction (HA-REACT) addresses existing gaps in the prevention of HIV and other co-infections, especially tuberculosis (TB) and viral hepatitis, among people who inject drugs (PWID). The three-year project was launched in late 2015 with core funding from the European Union (EU), and is being implemented by 23 partners representing 18 EU Member States. Twelve collaborating partners are contributing additional expertise, among them the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control and the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

Implementation of HA-REACT is taking place primarily in three focus countries, with attention given to preparing toolkits and guidelines that will benefit the entire European Union. The focus countries are Latvia, Lithuania and Hungary.

HA-REACT objectives:

- To improve capacity to respond to HIV and co-infection risks and provide harm reduction with a specific focus on PWID.
- To focus particularly on Member States where there are obvious gaps in effective and evidence-informed interventions, or where such interventions are not being implemented at a sufficient level.
- To encourage the implementation of comprehensive harm reduction programmes at sufficient scale in all EU Member States as an essential strategy for improving the prevention and treatment of HIV, TB and viral hepatitis.

The overall aim of HA-REACT is to significantly contribute to the elimination of HIV and to reductions in cases of TB and viral hepatitis among PWID in the European Union by 2020. This objective is aligned with strategic action plans issued by the European Union, the World Health Organization, UNAIDS and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime.



Correlation Network works in the area of social inclusion and health with a strong emphasis on harm reduction.