

A COMMUNITY-BASED MODEL OF PEER-LED ANONYMOUS RAPID HEPATITIS C (HCV) TESTING FOR PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS (PWIDS) IN MAURITIUS

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Background:

The Mauritian 2013 Integrated Biological and Behavioural Study among PWIDs demonstrated that 96.5% tested positive for HCV. Among PWIDs positive for HIV, 99.7% also tested positive for HCV. At the time, HCV-screening was government-led using only laboratory testing for people living with HIV (PLWH), pregnant women, blood donors, and PWIDs registering to the methadone-substitution programme. This study encouraged PILS to develop a new HCV-screening programme to reach PWIDs and other key populations (KPs).

PILS is the largest Mauritian HIV-support NGO, a member of the Hepatitis Alliance, and the first organisation in the country to offer rapid HCV-screening.

Approach:

In 2016, PILS started free rapid HCV screening at its nurse-led clinic. Testing, counselling, and referral to specialists were offered by the nurse and health-care-assistant to PWIDs, PLWH, and other KPs. After a capacity-building programme, we started peer-led outreach rapid screening in 2017. To expand access to PWIDs, we visited methadone-distribution and needle-exchange sites across Mauritius to offer anonymous HCV testing.

Outcome:

We expanded our outreach schedules, increasing methadone sites from six to twelve, and the visit-frequency from once to twice weekly, and plan to increase to four times weekly. From January 2017-January 2018, we conducted 295 rapid tests for PWIDs, with a positivity rate of 73% (216).

We provided HCV counselling, risk-reduction advice, treatment information to hundreds of PWIDs, and a leg-ulcer clinic for HIV-positive PWIDs. We can refer only those who can afford HCV genotyping - a discriminatory barrier to treatment within an existing welfare system meant to fund universal free healthcare.

Conclusion:

This programme has significantly increased HCV testing in PWIDs in Mauritius and helped provide them with the right support. Our data is aiding essential advocacy work for access to free HCV diagnostics and an expansion of the current treatment programme.