



Gaps in the Hepatitis C continuum of care among sex workers in Vancouver, Canada

Background

Recent advances in treatment have meant that hepatitis C (HCV), once a major global health problem, is now a highly curable disease. Evidence suggests that curing HCV leads to improved health, as well as to decreased transmission. Despite high rates of HCV among sex workers, there is little research on sex workers' engagement in HCV care.

The Question

How many sex workers are engaged in HCV care at different stages (the 'continuum of care'), and what factors are associated with recent HCV testing?

The Study

The Gender & Sexual Health Initiative (GSHI) research team drew upon data from **interviews with 705 sex workers between January 2010 and August 2013**, looking at HCV prevalence and engagement in the HCV care continuum within the last year. This project is part of AESHA (An Evaluation of Sex Workers Health Access), an ongoing study on working conditions, health and safety in the sex industry led by GSHI/BCCfE and UBC, in collaboration with a range of community partners, with ongoing outreach to street and indoor sex work venues (by experiential and non-experiential

The Results

Of 705 sex workers interviewed, **302 (43%) tested positive for hepatitis C (HCV)**.

Of these 302 women:

- 22% did not know their HCV status;
- 42% reported they had accessed HCV care;
- 14% reported they had been offered treatment; and
- Only 1% were currently receiving treatment.

Sex workers experience gaps in the HCV care continuum including:

- *Low rates of access to testing;*
- *High rates of undiagnosed HCV; and*
- *Negligible rates of access to treatment.*

Of 552 sex workers who self-reported not having Hepatitis C, only half (53%) had recently been tested. Recent testing was associated with being a sexual or gender minority, using drugs, living in the Downtown Eastside, and being born in Canada.

The Policy Implications

- There is an urgent need for more **research to better understand and address the barriers that sex workers face** in accessing the Hepatitis C (HCV) continuum of care.
- These findings support calls for **the decriminalization of sex work to increase sex workers' access to health care services**, and to ensure sex worker's health and safety.
- Comprehensive interventions like mobile and culturally competent health care services, and harm reduction and addiction management, are critical in increase sex workers' engagement in care.

Socias ME, Shannon K, Montaner JS, Guillemi S, Dobrer S, Nguyen P, Goldenberg S, Deering K. Gaps in the hepatitis C continuum of care among sex workers in Vancouver, British Columbia: Implications for voluntary hepatitis C virus testing, treatment and care. *Can J Gastroenterol Hepatol* 2015; 29 (8): 411-16.