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Original Article

Barriers and facilitators for assessment and treatment of hepatitis C virus infection in the opioid substitution treatment setting: insights from the ETHOS study

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Summary

Provision of hepatitis C virus (HCV) assessment and treatment via opioid substitution treatment (OST) clinics has been posed as an effective means of engaging populations with high HCV prevalence. This study explores OST client and health professional reports concerning barriers and facilitators affecting the delivery and uptake of HCV care and treatment within OST settings. In-depth interviews were conducted with 57 clients, 16 staff from four NSW clinics participating in the Australian ETHOS study and three peer workers. Client participants included those who had not had HCV assessment; those who had HCV assessment only; and those who were awaiting or undertaking HCV treatment. A clear difference in decisions about HCV treatment emerged between participant groups. For those who have not been assessed, barriers to engaging with HCV care included the perception that they were physically well, were not experiencing HCV symptoms, had other life priorities and were concerned about the side effects and tolerability of treatment. Those who had engaged with care expressed motivations stemming from seeing friends becoming unwell, wanting to live longer and hearing positive stories of treatment. For those interested in HCV treatment, issues related to both provider and setting were important, such as presence of an engaged clinician, an accessible treatment pathway and availability of

support. In this integrated care model, some barriers to HCV care and treatment (particularly those relating to health provider and the system) are minimized. In this setting, HCV treatment remained an unattractive option for a significant number of clients. Providing ways for those without HCV symptoms to be assessed for liver damage may be important to open up alternative conversations about HCV care. Further, the importance of a changing discourse of treatment is apparent from these data and could be enhanced by peer communication that provides information about successful treatment experiences.

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