

Rapped in poetry

A successful example of meaningful engagement and collaboration in a custodial setting ... with no budget



Introduction

Hepatitis C prevalence in Australia is highest in the correctional setting, with HCV prevalence being six times higher in prisons than in the broader community¹. Being in prison is a transmission risk in itself. This is recognised by national and state hepatitis strategies which highlight the importance of prevention for prisoners.

Background

Despite prioritising prison populations, restricted resources, structural policies and staff attitudes can severely limit harm reduction and health promotion initiatives in correctional centres. Barriers to engaging the affected prison communities meaningfully and within this context pose further challenges to effective health promotion in prison.

The idea was to make a rap song. A slam poetry piece. A health promotion message. A piece about the issues of hepatitis C in prison. A piece written and performed by and for men who are affected by hepatitis and the criminal justice system.

Method

Using community development principles the project worked with a group of eight prisoners to produce hepatitis C health promotion messages set in a custodial environment. These used multi-media and contemporary formats to which prison communities could relate.

All members of the group had been sentenced for drug related crime and were serving their sentences in Parklea Compulsory Drug Treatment Correctional Centre (CDTCC).

Stage 1: ran a series of education sessions with 8 men serving sentences at CDTCC. The sessions identified and explored key issues that people in custody contend with when trying to reduce their exposure to and risk of HCV transmission in custody.

Stage 2: introduced two professional slam poets from *Word Travels Arts Association* to the sessions which produced the foundation for a gritty piece of health promotion poetry.

Stage 3: relied and built on relationships and partnerships to engage the prison community by using diverse platforms for knowledge and skills development through music, literacy and social confidence in performance.

The poem was developed and produced by *JailBreak Radio* and the CSNSW audio class into a song. This song was used to develop social confidence skills amongst a larger group of men by performing and recording a music video featuring the song. The health promotion message has been broadcast on Prison TV and *Jailbreak Radio* to broaden the project's reach and enhance sustainability.



Hep C In Da House

Hear the siren and the cops break
down the door

Next thing you know – face down
on the floor

Shackles and chains heading through
the revolving door again

Going through the court room feeling
the pain, feeling the shame

Looking for someone else to blame

Here I'm back copping a wack

Back in the yard doin a lap

Looking for the foil for da dragon
to chase

Not enough to go around gotta
get the brace

Wish I could get this out of my face

Nine other people just had a taste

Using a dirty rotten brace it's a
disgrace to be in my place

CHORUS

Hep C's in da house better watch
your back

Watch your back

Watch your back

Use a dirty needle and you're on the
wrong track

Use a dirty needle and you're on the
wrong track

DEFINITIONS:

Brace = fit or needle and syringe

Dragon to chase = smoking heroin

Copping a wack = serving a custodial sentence

Taste = injecting illicit drugs

Results

The project produced 4 education sessions and a health promotion poem. Through a series of music workshops the poem was put to music and performed in another video workshop producing a music video that was broadcast on Prison TV and *Jailbreak Radio*.

We shared stories and learnt from each other. What it's like to have hep C in gaol. What options are available. What the reality is for people when they're trying to prevent transmission or get treatment for hepatitis C with limited access to service and no access to equipment. What the risks are and what it does it does to a man's sense of self.

Conclusions

By combining available resources and skills across organisations that work with people in custody, we were able to strengthen networks and support genuine community engagement to produce relevant messaging to high risk populations.

1. Ministerial Advisory Committee on AIDS, Sexual Health and Hepatitis (MACASHH), Hepatitis C Subcommittee, 2008, Hepatitis C Prevention, Treatment and Care: Guidelines for Australian Custodial Settings.

Image above from Hepatitis NSW *Transmission Magazine*, Edition 15.

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