

# Access to Hepatitis C care for hard to reach PWID: Feasibility of rapid saliva tests and fibrosis assessments in drug consumption rooms

Nathalie Brunner<sup>1</sup>, Philip Bruggmann<sup>1</sup>, Peter Menzi<sup>2</sup>, Regine Hofmann<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arud Centres for Addiction Medicine, Zurich, Switzerland

<sup>2</sup>Infodrog, Berne, Switzerland

<sup>3</sup>K&A drug consumption rooms, Zurich, Switzerland

## Background

Patient engagement among people who inject drugs (PWID) is limited because of insufficient availability of need-adapted, low threshold health care settings for this vulnerable group. In addition, PWID are often reluctant to have their blood taken. These are two reasons why only a low number of PWID are in adequate Hepatitis C (HCV) care to be assessed, diagnosed and treated. Providing transient elastography (TE) and non-invasive HCV testing has been shown to be effective to engage PWID in Hepatitis C care <sup>(1,2)</sup>.

Can PWID who are unaware of their HCV status be reached by integrating non-invasive testing in low threshold services like consumption rooms?

## Methods

Anonymous Hepatitis C counselling, rapid saliva tests and transient elastography (TE) scans were provided free of charge over a period of six half days in the drug-consumption rooms (DCR) of Zurich.

Patients who tested positive were encouraged to have a capillary blood sample taken for HCV RNA testing and genotyping. Patients diagnosed with HCV were referred to an addiction unit with integrated hepatitis care for further assessment and treatment.

## Drug Consumption Rooms (DCRs)

Injection facility in a drug consumption room in Zurich:



Professionally run legal facilities where people can consume drugs (obtained elsewhere) in a safe and supervised environment

- Low threshold access and service
- Run by teams of nurses and social workers
- Governed by Zurich city council
- Two main rationales:
  - They provide access to a hard to reach high-risk population (Public Health)
  - They keep drug users out of public spaces (Social Security)

- Services:
  - Supervised injecting and smoking rooms
  - Provision of sterile injecting, smoking and inhaling equipment
  - Immediate resuscitation after overdose
  - Primary health care, social work, referral to drug treatment

## Results

Of the 160 to 260 PWID who frequent a DCR over the course of a year (on an intermittent or regular basis)

- **86 patients agreed to participate in our study**
- **88% (76) agreed to a rapid HCV antibody test, 90% (77) to a transient elastography (TE) scan**

| Patient characteristics (n=86)                | % (n)            |
|---|------------------|
| Median age                                    | 43 years (21-69) |
| Male  | 70% (60)         |
| History of intravenous drug use (IDU)         | 55% (47)         |
| Receiving treatment in substitution programme | 65% (56)         |

- **39% (30) rapid saliva antibody tests positive**
- **16 of the 30 PWID with a positive rapid test result agreed to a blood sample**
- **10 tested positive for HCV RNA (13% of all tested for HCV antibodies)**

| TE (transient elastography) scan results (n=77) | % (n)    |
|---|----------|
| F0, F1 (<7.1kPa)                                | 54% (63) |
| F2 (>7.1–9.4 kPa)                               | 21% (16) |
| F3, F4 (>9.5 kPa)                               | 13% (10) |

## Discussion

**In drug consumption rooms HCV rapid saliva tests combined with transient elastography (TE) scans are feasible and received well by PWID.**

**Bringing HCV care to low threshold services is a promising way to engage PWID in HCV and liver health care.**

(1) Foucher J, Reiller B, Jullien V et al. FibroScan used in street-based outreach for drug users is useful for Hepatitis C virus screening and management: a prospective study. *J Viral Hepat* 2009; 16 (2): 121-131.

(2) Moessner BK, Jorgensen TR, Skamling M, et al. Outreach screening of drug users for cirrhosis with transient elastography. *Addiction* 2011; 106 (5): 970-976.