

Pop-up hepatitis C testing for people in supported accommodation during the COVID-19 outbreak

Royal Surrey County Hospital were able to test almost 200 people through pop-up scheme

Key points

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the 'Everyone In' policy meant that people who would otherwise be homeless were given accommodation in hotels. Surrey Operational Delivery Network, like many other ODNs, used this as an opportunity to engage with this cohort, offering testing and treatment for hepatitis C.
- Testing was carried out in collaboration with The Hepatitis C Trust's peer-to-peer support staff and volunteers who worked to encourage people to engage. 187 people were tested with eight tests returning new antibody positive results.
- Liver ultrasound scans were also offered. People who tested positive had their contact details taken for treatment at the point of access and were offered support from The Hepatitis C Trust's peer support team.

Background

Nationally, over a third of people who inject drug who report homelessness have chronic HCV infection. This proportion has increased slightly since 2011, demonstrating the challenges this group faces in accessing hepatitis C care.

The housing of homeless people in accommodation during the COVID-19 pandemic offered an opportunity to engage these people in testing and treatment given this group, which is normally dispersed, was now housed together and in stable accommodation.

The Surrey ODN and The Hepatitis C Trust worked to deliver several pop-up testing events at accommodation housing this group in Surrey.

Encouraging testing

By mid-July testing had been delivered at 8 sites. The sites tested at included supported housing projects and hotels used to accommodate people who would otherwise be homeless. The testing team consisted of clinicians and nurses from Surrey ODN and peer support staff and volunteers from The Hepatitis C Trust.

Up to two days before testing days, leaflets would be given out with all residents' food packs with information about the testing event. This included photos of the testing staff explaining who they were, contact details for the team, information about hepatitis C as well as the testing that would be offered and how any treatment would be delivered.

On testing days, the peer support team would liaise with the facility staff and together with a staff member who had a rapport with residents they would go door-to-door to visit residents. Peer support workers or volunteers would then engage the client and relay their own experience of the virus with the aim of improving their awareness of hepatitis C, the relevant risk factors, and encourage them to get a test. An additional incentive for testing uptake was the offer of a £5 supermarket voucher.

Testing

Testing was then available with nurses in a gazebo tent outside the accommodation. Some clients would agree to testing even before they had been engaged in-depth by the peer, given they had received information previously and knew the team were coming to test.

If clients were happy to be tested but not to come out of their room, the peer team would liaise with a nurse to facilitate testing in someone's room.

Everyone who took up the offer of a test was given an antibody swab test. Any antibody clients were offered either a dried blood spot test or wet bloods were taken. Clients were encouraged to give wet blood due to a quicker turnaround time where possible.

Fibroscanning was available for anyone who consented, and everyone was encouraged to have a scan by the nursing team. Cirrhotic patients were then seen by the hepatology consultant for review.

Whilst clients waited for test results, they could access refreshments provided by the nursing team who tried to provide as welcoming an atmosphere as possible.

Follow-up

Any clients who returned positive had their details taken for treatment and would be treated at the point of access. They were also told they would receive a voucher at each monthly appointment throughout treatment and a double voucher when they attended their final appointment to check they had achieved cure (SVR-12).

Results

Across an initial group of 8 sites a total of 187 patients were tested and, of these, eight were new antibody positive results. The testing days also helped the team test eight clients who needed to confirm their SVR12. Four cirrhotic patients were identified with their cirrhosis believed to be caused by other factors.

The testing days also helped build relationships with the services visited and led to new referrals from the services after the testing events.

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