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Courts Pharmacy hepatitis C treatment dispensing

Hepatitis C treatment given out daily from community pharmacy to support under-served patients

Key points

- Courts Pharmacy in Ramsgate provides hepatitis C treatment for patients accessing its drug treatment services.
- The pathway was made possible by linking The Forward Trust, Courts Pharmacy and Kent Network via Kings ODN.
- Patients who are deemed unlikely to independently manage four weeks of treatment are given the medication in the pharmacy itself so they do not have to look after large numbers of tablets for long periods of time.
- The initiative got around current legislative barriers preventing the dispensing of hepatitis C treatment from pharmacies by giving the patient the bottle when they came to collect their daily OST and taking it back for safe storage afterwards.

Overview

Following a discussion with Emma Lloyd, a nurse working at East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust, Courts Pharmacy in Ramsgate made arrangements to dispense daily hepatitis C treatment to patients with particularly unstable lifestyles.

Courts Pharmacy provides harm reduction and addiction services, and its hepatitis C treatment pathway recognises the increased risk of contracting blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis C that the population accessing these services and injecting drugs faces. Pharmacists are able to build relationships with this group because of the regularity with which they access services. This allows them to make a judgement about how responsible patients are likely to be about looking after and regularly taking treatment.

The initiative has overcome current legislative barriers preventing pharmacies from dispensing hepatitis C treatment by allowing patients leading unstable lives to more easily take their medication. As it stands, regulation does not allow pharmacies to dispense the treatment, and are only able to give it out in bottles of four-weeks' worth of medication at a time. Courts Pharmacy's initiative involves staff passing the patient's medication to them over the counter for them to take, then taking it back for safe keeping. The pharmacy

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provides this service on a voluntary basis, rather than receiving financial reward, as they would if permitted to be the primary dispenser of the treatment.

Currently one patient is receiving their hepatitis C medication via Courts Pharmacy in this way, and they have reported that all is going well and they are on track to complete treatment. Should there be the need for more patients to take treatment in this way, the initiative could be expanded.

Why and how the service was established

For most patients, receiving their treatment every four weeks from the pharmacy is not a problem. But for others, carrying and managing four weeks of medication poses difficulties, including safe storage and remembering to take medication on a regular timetable. Emma Lloyd, a nurse working at East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust, saw an opportunity for pharmacies to support people who may lead particularly unstable lives and need more support to successfully complete treatment.

Community pharmacies are in a unique position to tackle the spread of hepatitis C: pharmacies which dispense opioid substitution therapies (OST) and needle and syringe programmes (NSP) have daily contact with people who are currently injecting drugs and so are most at risk of being infected by (and passing on) hepatitis C. [A pilot](#) which ran hepatitis C testing in community pharmacies in London found that 84% of people who engaged with the testing said they would like to receive hepatitis C treatment at their pharmacy, as opposed to secondary care. However, at the moment there are legislative barriers to pharmacies being able to dispense treatment.

Emma worked closely with The Forward Trust to identify the best pharmacies to approach in the area. She then called each pharmacy to discuss the merits of giving out treatment daily, rather than in four-week batches, and Courts Pharmacy took up her offer.

The patient currently on this treatment pathway was known to the pharmacy before they were offered the medication. This allowed staff at the pharmacy to build a relationship with the patient and make an informed decision about how likely they were to complete treatment if it was given in four-week batches. They thought the patient had too much instability in their life to be able to look after and regularly take a month's worth of medication. Given pharmacy staff saw the patient daily when they collected their OST, it made sense to also give them their hepatitis C treatment at this point.

How the service works

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To get around the legislative barrier preventing pharmacies from dispensing hepatitis C treatment, Courts Pharmacy only holds the medication in safe-keeping for patients, leaving them to take the drugs out of the bottle themselves. Every day, when the patient comes to the pharmacy to collect their OST, pharmacy staff also hand them their bottle of medication and observe them taking one tablet, after which point the bottle is handed back for safe storage.

While the pharmacy cannot give out treatment in batches of less than four weeks as prescribed, this method means patients do not need to look after the drugs themselves, which makes it more difficult for the patient to miss treatment or take too much on a single day, and means the pharmacy can provide support if it is needed.

Outcomes

The initiative has successfully identified a way to support patients who are most likely to be lost on the treatment pathway to access their medication for hepatitis C. Offering safe storage for the drugs in a service which patients access frequently anyway prevents them from being lost to care through the complexity of alternative treatment pathways which may not be appropriate for people leading less stable lives.

While currently one patient is on this treatment pathway, it is hoped that this model will be expanded to other pharmacies in the area and replicated across the country, unless and until the enactment of legislative change allowing pharmacies to act as primary dispensers of hepatitis C treatment.

Future plans

The biggest challenge to implementing this initiative has been getting other pharmacies on board with the idea. Some of the bigger pharmacies approached responded that they did not feel they could accommodate it at that time. However, Emma is keen to expand the pathway should there be people whom the pharmacies think would benefit.

For additional details, please contact:

Emma Lloyd, nurse at East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust. Email:

e.lloyd1@nhs.net