

Celebrating success- Fay Smith in Slough

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BACKGROUND

Fay Smith is a nurse and hepatitis C champion in our Slough service. Fay became interested in HCV after doing some independent research and learning that our clients are at significantly higher risk of contracting the virus and less likely to engage in treatment. She faced numerous barriers when she first started offering testing to clients such as clients believing it required wet bloods rather than a finger prick, and long waiting lists at the specialist HCV clinic at the local hospital.

Through conversation and education, Fay was able to change clients' perceptions on what testing entailed as well as explain the importance of harm reduction such as not sharing needles and equipment, and safe sex.

Fay was able to overcome the issue of long waits to start treatment by partnering with a viral specialist nurse in a local walk in clinic. This significantly reduced waiting times, lowering the number of clients lost to follow up and not commencing treatment.

Although Fay had made significant progress in providing HCV testing and treatment, she still had difficulty reaching out to people who were homeless, resulting in low engagement. This changed dramatically due to Covid-19 as homeless people were moved into hostels....

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Fay took full advantage of Slough's homeless population being located in a small number of hostels. In collaboration with Izzy Papas from The Hepatitis C Trust, Fay contacted numerous hostels around the town. They were faced with some reluctance from the hostel managers but with some gentle persuasion and education minds were changed. Fay and Izzy successfully established HCV testing in 5 hostels around Slough, massively boosting engagement with homeless people and increasing testing figures. On day one of hostel testing, in Look Ahead Hostel, Fay and Izzy tested 18 residents and staff. This alleviated anxiety and stigma about HCV and testing as word got around that *'it wasn't that bad'*. Additionally, a £5 voucher was given to anyone tested to award engagement with the scheme and increase incentive for anyone considering being tested.

RELEVANCE TO HCV ELIMINATION

Studies have indicated that being homeless is a risk factor for contracting HCV. Additionally, many homeless people face multiple risk factors such as currently/previiously injecting drugs and prison stays. 'People experiencing homelessness are thought to be 50 times more likely to be chronically infected with the hepatitis C virus (HCV), yet only 3% will receive treatment' (1). Despite being such a high risk

group, access to testing and treatment has been persistently low. To achieve elimination of HCV in England, people who are homeless must be engaged in testing and treatment. Taking advantage of people being housed in hostels during Covid-19 is an excellent way increasing engagement.

KEY LEARNING

- Seize the moment and take full advantage of an opportunity that presents itself
- Joint working with other organizations such as The Hepatitis C Trust can improve project outcomes and client engagement
- Reaching out to people who are homeless by going to hostels is a successful way of increasing engagement and providing testing

REFERENCES

- (1) Dusheiko, G. *Hepatitis C and Homelessness – improving access to treatment*. Available from: <https://www.homeless.org.uk/connect/blogs/2018/aug/23/hepatitis-c-and-homelessness-improving-access-to-treatment> (accessed 10 August 2020).

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