

Queensland Prison Forum on Hepatitis C Treatment and Opioid Substitution Therapy

24 February 2019, Fortitude Valley

Background

In recognition of the high prevalence of hepatitis C amongst people in custodial settings and the challenges of this unique and transient environment, ASHM convened a Queensland Forum on Hepatitis C Treatment in Prisons on 23 February 2018, funded by Queensland Health.

The Queensland prison system is comprised of 14 correctional centres, including two privately managed centres. Unlike most Australian states there is no centralised health service for Queensland's correctional centres. Instead, prison health services are the responsibility of the local hospital and health service (HHS), translating to significant variation in hepatitis C treatment uptake across the state, and a range of unique models of care. The 2018 Forum was attended by 57 participants and was successful in bringing together health staff working in Queensland correctional centres and those providing in-reach viral hepatitis services to discuss models of care, challenges and solutions in moving towards eliminating hepatitis C from Queensland's correctional centres. From the presentations, brainstorming sessions and discussion at the 2018 Forum, ten recommendations were developed and disseminated to those who attended.

2019 Queensland Prison Forum

A subsequent Queensland Prison Forum was held on 22 February 2019, in collaboration with the Queensland State-wide Gastroenterology Clinical Network, and attended by 72 participants. The objective of the 2019 Forum was to bring together health staff working in correctional centres with those providing in-reach or telehealth services to discuss progress in the hepatitis C treatment programs and the roll-out and upscaling of opioid substitution therapy (OST) across Queensland correctional centres.

Representatives from each correctional centre/HHS were invited to provide brief updates on their hepatitis C programs including progress and changes implemented over the past 12 months, remaining challenges and future directions. The 2019 program comprised an overview of OST including new and emerging therapies, and insights from the phased implementation of OST across Queensland's correctional centres. Australian research on hepatitis C treatment and prevention in prison, processes in the watch house environment, and community organisations providing support to clients were also highlighted and discussed.

Through the service updates, it was evident that significant progress was made over the 12 months between the 2018 and 2019 Forums, with several services reporting increases in hepatitis C screening and treatment uptake, and overall improved efficiencies and streamlining of processes. Although continuity of care for patients as they transitioned between centres and back into the community was still identified as a challenging phase, services indicated that improvements were made following the strengthening of communication between services after the 2018 Forum. Following the 2019 Forum, 39 participants completed an evaluation with 100% of respondents agreeing that the objective of the Forum was met and 95% indicating that they found the Forum to be useful. Comments from participants highlight that the Forum was a valuable opportunity to network, strengthen communication and streamline processes, learn from other models of care and be motivated by progress throughout the state.

A new set of recommendations based upon the presentations and discussion from the 2019 Forum have been compiled and sent to the Forum participants. The next Queensland Prison Forum will be held in early 2020.

Recommendations: 2019 Queensland Prisons Forum



ASHM to advocate for changes to the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme to allow nurse practitioners (NPs) to prescribe direct acting antivirals for HCV treatment under the s100 Highly Specialised Drugs Schedule in correctional centres. Support NPs and services to implement these changes if approved.



Continue to promote and advocate for dedicated BBV/HCV nursing portfolios to support the establishment of strong HCV treatment programs.



Collaborate with Queensland Corrective Services to address attitudinal barriers from correctional officers around HCV treatment and OST in prisons. Explore and implement formal and informal opportunities for education of non-clinical staff and encourage “champion” officers within the prison.



Continue to advocate for the provision of needle and syringe programs (NSPs) in prisons. This includes both high level advocacy and everyday advocacy, through engaging colleagues in harm reduction education and promoting the supporting evidence for prison-based NSPs.



Offer and encourage retreatment, provide harm reduction education, and implement a HCV RNA retesting procedure in all services.



Use the evolving HCV in Queensland correctional centres contact list to support continuity of care and increase efficiency of services as patients are transferred and released.



Communicate and share insights to support all correctional centres to efficiently implement OST programs as the phased implementation continues.



Implement point of care testing for HCV RNA if approved for use in Australia, following appropriate staff training.