

HEPATITISVICTORIA

Hepatitis C and Me 2008

A survey on attitudes and knowledge relating to hepatitis C conducted
on behalf of Hepatitis C Victoria

Key Results and Findings

May 2008

Executive summary

The "Hepatitis C and Me" survey, was completed online by 1,033 respondents from around Australia. It has found an alarming level of ignorance about most aspects of hepatitis pointing to an urgent need for **better education campaigns** that reach both communities at risk of contracting hepatitis C and the general public.

Lack of awareness about the symptoms of hepatitis C and how it is transmitted were of key concern.

Only 49.6 per cent of all respondents could correctly identify how different forms of hepatitis were transmitted.

Only 22.2 per cent of all respondents were able to correctly identify symptoms of different forms of hepatitis.

More than half of all respondents (53.2 per cent) incorrectly identified hepatitis C as being a sexually transmissible infection.

The magnitude of this risk was demonstrated within the survey where **nearly two thirds of people who either have, or have had, hepatitis C said that they did not know how hepatitis C was transmitted at the time they contracted it.**

The danger posed by low public knowledge of hepatitis C is significant. Without appropriate levels of knowledge of hepatitis C, the public is at greater risk of contracting the virus and is less likely to be able to recognise symptoms that could lead to early detection and treatment.

Greater public understanding of what hepatitis C is (and what it is not) also has a pivotal role to play in reducing the level of stigma and discrimination often levelled at people with hepatitis C.

More than one in three people with hepatitis C have directly experienced social discrimination because of their status and **nearly 81 per cent have felt uncomfortable about revealing their status to others** for fear of being stigmatised. The persecution perceived by many people with hepatitis C has a significant impact on the broader public; when people feel compelled to hide their status, it reduces their likelihood of seeking appropriate medical services and increases the risk that they will transmit the virus onto others.

Respondents also felt that the media had a role to play in hepatitis C education. Nearly 90 per cent of respondents said they would like to see more responsible coverage of hepatitis C in the media. Nearly 50 per cent of respondents felt that the media portrayed hepatitis C in a negative light and slightly more felt that the media sometimes confused the public by putting hepatitis C in with other diseases.

There was also a significant desire among respondents for better education campaigns. **Seventy-six per cent of respondents to the survey agreed that better education campaigns were needed** and **more than half** identified education among the top three priorities facing hepatitis C organisations into the future.

The other major finding of this report is that there is a great deal of public support for harm reduction programs such as needle syringe programs as a way to reduce the spread of hepatitis C – and even public support for introducing harm reduction programs into areas such as prisons.

Again, an increase in harm reduction programs was identified by all three major groups among their top three priorities for the future. **Nearly 96 per cent of respondents supported harm reduction programs in general society.** These findings are in line with Carla Treloar and Suzanne Fraser's research for the University of NSW in 2007 which found high levels of support for needle syringe programs in areas where drug use was a known issue and Lenton and Phillips' 1997 research which suggested public support rates as high as 85.6%. Both pieces of research also concluded that exposure to education increases the level of public support for harm reduction programs.

Given the high level of support for harm reduction within the community, this may be the optimal time to look seriously at the idea of introducing needle exchange programs into prisons. **Ninety five per cent of respondents supported the idea of introducing harm reduction programs into prisons.**

It should be noted that qualitative feedback collected, which asked people to articulate their quantitative responses, indicated that most respondents did not endorse drug usage but rather felt that it was inevitable in society and that it was appropriate to support programs that sought to limit the damage associated with drug use. Indeed, many respondents questioned the ethics of withholding beneficial health program from prisoners on the basis of their social status.