

INFECTIOUS DISEASE AMONG PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS IN FRANCE: THE IMPORTANCE OF ACTING ON RISK ENVIRONMENT IN AN EVOLVING CRISIS

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Context

- France is generally presented as a country with an efficient harm reduction model, **thanks to high OST coverage, a facilitated access to HCV treatment.**
- Our country is currently facing a very critical situation regarding the HCV dynamic among PWIDs.
- The objectives of the present study were to describe the HCV exposure among PWIDs, by measuring HCV incidence and the level of at-risk injection practices.
- We also aimed to identify **factors associated with this high level of risk exposure**, and to **contextualize epidemiological data using a sociological analysis of the characteristics of the French harm reduction model** compared with those of other similar European countries.

Methods

- Our study combined data from ANRS-Coquelicot **cross-sectional seroprevalence repeated surveys**. These studies were based on a time-location random sampling design and blood testing.
- Fingertick blood samples were collected on dried blood spots (DBS).
- We estimated **HCV incidence** in two ways:
 - by using a **statistical comparison method between the two cross-sectional surveys**;
 - by using **biological data to measure the presence of HCV-RNA among people testing negative for anti-HCV antibodies**.

Results

- **Needle sharing** (in the last month) **has increased significantly**, from 13% in 2004 to 24% in 2013 (*Jauffret-Roustide et al, Drug and Alcohol Review 2017*).
- Multivariate analysis showed that the time period is only significantly associated with needle sharing among the **most precarious PWID** (IRR=4.2).
- Other factors associated with needle sharing within this group include alcohol (IRR=4.0), reusing syringes (IRR=3.3), as well as being a woman (IRR=3.8) and a subjective poor health condition (IRR=2.1).

Results

- In 2013, **HCV incidence was estimated at 11%** a year based on the statistical comparative method (*Léon et al. Epidemiology & Infection, 2018*).
- We made another estimation with a biological method and found a very high HCV incidence (22%).
- **Knowledge of HCV status was quite low:** 39% of PWID declared being HCV negative and tested positive.
- **33% of PWID said they face difficulties when trying to obtain sterile syringes** in the last 6 months (*Weill Barillet et al. Revue d'épidémiologie et de santé publique, 2016*).
- **Relative decrease in HCV seroprevalence**, from 73% in 2004 to 67% in 2013, but this figure was **not significant** (*Léon et al. Biostatistics 2015*).

Conclusion

- ANRS-Coquelicot is the only French study that provides HCV estimates based on biological methods at a national level. The two last editions of the survey has been done in 2004 and 2013 and will be repeated next year in 2020.
- The estimated HCV incidence and the increase in at-risk practices in France were among the highest observed in all high-income countries.
- This critical epidemiological situation may be partly explained by **France's delay in implementing a strong harm reduction model and its persisting criminalisation of drug use.**

Conclusion

- Indeed, France began to enforce harm reduction policies, later than the Netherlands, Switzerland or Germany.
- France currently features a neutral, weak and exclusively sanitary approach to harm reduction that is profoundly influenced by drug prohibition.
- In this context, **harm reduction has been less efficient** compared to other European countries, especially for the most vulnerable PWIDs.
- It is now urgent that France implement a new harm reduction model that really takes into account **risk environment in order to improve conditions for PWIDs.**