

## **Attitude of staff regarding integrated hepatitis C treatment at eight harm reduction centers in Georgia**

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**Background and Aims:** Georgia, a country with a large burden of hepatitis C virus (HCV), launched an HCV elimination program in 2015. People who inject drugs (PWID) are at highest risk of transmission as documented by the national HCV seroprevalence survey. To improve linkage to care among PWID, the Ministry of Labor, Health, and Social Affairs decided to pilot HCV treatment integration with harm reduction (HR) services. However, there was concern about potential resistance of employees at HR centers to the inherent added responsibilities. The aim of this study was to evaluate attitudes and readiness of HR centers' staff for integrated HCV treatment.

**Methods:** A self-administered questionnaire was used with questions regarding awareness of the HCV elimination program, and perceived feasibility and barriers of implementing HCV integrated care at HR centers. Managers, social workers, counselors, laboratory technicians, and nurses were surveyed from eight harm reduction centers at six regions including the capital of Georgia, Tbilisi.

**Results:** Of a total 115 respondents surveyed, 49% (n=56) were female. The vast majority of surveyed individuals (96% [n=110]) believe HCV treatment should be integrated with HR services. Perceived benefits included convenience for PWIDs (74% [n=85]), improving trust in the elimination program (67% [n=77]), improving linkage to HCV care (76% [n=87]), and improving treatment compliance (56% [n=64]). Most (86% [n=99]) respondents thought that PWIDs would prefer to have HCV treatment at HR centers compared to specialized clinics. Insufficient administrative and technical resources were reported as major barriers to starting HCV treatment at HR centers by 26% (n=30) and 62.6% (n=72) of respondents, respectively.

**Conclusions:** The study showed the readiness and willingness of HR centers' staff to integrate HCV

treatment with other HR services at their facilities, as well as perceived barriers.