20 years of managing hepatitis C among people who use drugs in France

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Hepatitis C, which affects nearly 50 million people worldwide, is a potentially fatal disease. People who inject drugs account for up to 70% of cases worldwide. In France, since 2004, Inserm, ANRS MIE, *Santé publique France* and Tours University Hospital have been conducting the Coquelicot survey to estimate the prevalence and incidence of hepatitis C among drug users receiving care in treatment and harm reduction services. The latest results from this survey have just been published in the October issue of the journal *Nature Communications*. They show a reduction of at least 50% in the prevalence and incidence of the disease among these populations. According to the authors, this decline likely reflects the combined effect of the scale-up of direct-acting antivirals and harm reduction policies. France is currently at a turning point and could achieve the WHO's targets for the elimination of hepatitis C by 2030.

Hepatitis C affects nearly 50 million people worldwide. Transmitted through blood, it can be fatal, but effective treatments are now available to combat it: direct-acting antivirals (DAAs). Its persistence is due to the lack of immunity following viral clearance or treatment. Added to this are disparities in access to care. WHO has set itself a target of eliminating the disease by 2030.

Hepatitis C therefore remains a major global health challenge, particularly among people who inject drugs. In high-income countries, injecting drug use combined with the sharing of contaminated equipment is indeed one of the main driver of HCV transmission: in Europe, 20 to 70% of cases result from injecting drug use.

In France, the Coquelicot survey was launched in 2004 by Inserm, ANRS MIE, *Santé publique France* and Tours University Hospital to monitor trends in hepatitis C among people who use drugs receiving care in treatment and harm reduction services; it was then repeated in 2013 and 2023. To date, this is the only epidemiological and sociological survey involving biological samples that enables the prevalence of hepatitis

C and associated factors to be estimated in a representative sample of this population in France.

The results of the latest survey, which have just been published in *Nature Communications*, show a sharp reduction (-61%) in the number of new cases of hepatitis C per year among people who inject drugs: the incidence thus fell from 6.5 to 2.4% person-years* between 2013 and 2023. During this period, the prevalence of active hepatitis C virus (HCV) halved among all drug users (19.4% in 2013 compared with 9.5% in 2023), as well as among injecting drug users (29.6% in 2013 compared with 14.5% in 2023). These estimates were produced using mathematical modelling, based on biological data on HCV RNA, which allowed only active infections to be taken into account.

The authors of the article attribute these encouraging results to the current French healthcare model, which is characterised by a comprehensive approach to screening (in terms of tools and 'outreach' approaches**), widespread availability of hepatitis C treatments for all sections of the population, including the most vulnerable groups, and access to harm reduction policies.

These harm reduction policies include several public health measures such as access to clean syringes, the prescription of opioid agonist treatments (methadone and buprenorphine) available throughout France, and '*haltes soins addictions'* (low-risk consumption rooms), which are currently only available in Paris and Strasbourg.

Quote: *"Harm reduction policies have been evaluated in many countries and have proven their effectiveness, yet they are nevertheless regularly called into question, which can lead to the closure of certain centres. These closures expose people who use drugs to increased health risks. It is essential to strengthen these policies by drawing on scientific evidence*." (Dr Marie Jauffret-Roustide, Research Director at Inserm, at the Centre for the Study of Social Movements (Inserm/CNRS/EHESS) and scientific lead of the Coquelicot study since 2004)

The results indicate that France is on track to meet the WHO elimination targets by 2030. To maintain this trend and avoid resurgence or infection peaks, it is crucial that access to care, testing and harm reduction, and reinfection prevention remain a high priority.

** This means that if 100 people are monitored for one year, an average of 2.4 new cases can be expected.*

*** The 'outreach' approach encourages professionals and institutions to reach out to people to intervene at an early stage, before difficulties become entrenched, with the aim of identification and prevention rather than remediation.*

Reference:

Chiara E. Sabbatini [1] , Yann Le Strat [1] , Christophe Bonaldi [1] , Cécile Brouard [1] , Martin Audran [2] , Leïla Saboni [1] , Jean-Baptiste Richard [1] , Amélie David [3] , Catherine Gaudy-Graffin[3] , Stéphane Chevaliez [4] , Francis Barin [3] , Karl Stefic [3] and Marie Jauffret-Roustide [2,5,6] .

HCV incidence and prevalence trends among people who use drugs in France 2004 to 2023. Nature Communications 2026. https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-026-78598-3.

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For further information: https://anrs.fr/en/homepage/

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For further information: https://www.santepubliquefrance.fr/en