Impact of COVID-19 on harm reduction services in Europe

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Why it is important to focus on Harm Reduction services?

- A high proportion of new HCV and HBV cases occur among PWID.
- Harm reduction services play a central role in the prevention of viral hepatitis and linkage to care for PWID.
- If these essential services are negatively impacted by the pandemic, then among other things, progress towards 2030 goals likely to be at risk.
PWID: transmission and burden of viral hepatitis

A high proportion of new HCV and HBV cases (transmission) occur among PWID.

The prevalence of chronic infection among PWID is very high (burden of diseases).

HR services a frontline response for this key group.
Sources for C-19 impact on HR services in EU

3 Covid-19 Trendspotter studies
April to June 2020
- Impact on drug services
- Impact on use and harms

January to April 2021
- Impact on markets, use, harms and services
Trendspotter approach

Adapted trendspotter methodology

Planning
- Virtual team meetings
- Adapt trendspotter method
- Identify data sources

Data gathering and analysis
- Four online surveys
- Five virtual facilitated groups
- Data and literature reviews

Output production
- Trendspotter briefing
  drafted and published

Week 1
(1 April 2020)

Weeks 2 and 3

Weeks 4 and 5

What have been the main changes and challenges for European drug services since the emergence of COVID-19?
Perceived impact on drug-related harms
(clinical experts in 15 EURO-DEN hospital emergency sentinel sites)
Changes in service availability and provision

Expert ratings, Online survey among 25 national Focal Points

Drug treatment services

Harm reduction services

Source: Online survey among ReAct national focal points April 2020.
Impact on harm reduction services

Closure or significant reduction of harm reduction services since COVID-19 measures were implemented in the EU countries and Norway, based on reporting from Reitox national focal points

Note: Services are not available in all countries. The percentage represents the number of countries reporting some service closures or reductions as a proportion of the total number of countries reporting that this intervention is nationally available.

Source: Online survey of Reitox national focal points, April 2020.
Impact on drug treatment services including OST

Closure or significant reduction of drug treatment services since COVID-19 measures were implemented in the EU countries and Norway, based on reporting from Reitox national focal points

- Outpatient psychosocial treatment (total n = 23)
- OST in specialised centres (total n = 24)
- OST in non-specialised centres (GPs) (total n = 13)
- Inpatient treatment in hospitals (total n = 21)
- Residential treatment (total n = 19)

Note: Services are not available in all countries. The percentage represents the number of countries reporting some service closures or reductions as a proportion of the total number of countries reporting that this intervention is nationally available.

Source: Online survey of Reitox national focal points, April 2020.
Impact on access to clean syringes

Access to syringes before and after COVID-19 among people who inject drugs — European Web Survey on Drugs: COVID-19 (n = 261)
Harm reduction services

Low threshold centres (drop-ins) experienced severe disruptions as a result of lock downs and physical distancing measures;

Less visits to services - larger quantities of drug use equipment and materials given out;

Drug checking services stopped face to face activities but increased online presence.
Challenges for service providers

Accessing personal protective equipment (PPE);

Supporting clients to access (other) essential services;

Introducing or scaling up remote and digital services;

Innovation to ensure continuity of services ➔
Innovation and adaptation in harm reduction services

Self-service spot providing harm reduction material, managed by clients themselves, in a low-threshold service in Split, Croatia, during the COVID-19 pandemic

Source: Nevenka Mardešić, HELP Association.

Drug worker with PPE in a new mobile drug consumption room in Lisbon, Portugal

Source: Programa de Consumo Vigilado, Grupo de Ativistas em Tratamentos and Médicos do Mundo
Innovation to ensure continuity of OST

- Extending take-home regulations;
- Reduction of supervised intake, urine controls;
- Electronic prescriptions & home delivery;
- OST via outreach programmes;
- Introduction of low threshold OST.
COVID lessons from first studies

- Harm reduction services represent an essential part of the health system response to the pandemic; need recognition for this

- Need to invest in innovation, acquiring digital skills

- Continue to develop strong local networks to deliver an integrated, holistic and person-centred response
Where are we now?
Future trends and HR services

Not just C-19-related….

• Increase in stimulant use and injection – new challenges?
• Increased risk of outbreaks?
• From nightlife to home life
• New arenas for interventions?
• New ‘heyday’ for outreach approaches
• Street work and screen work?
Conclusions

The pandemic and restrictive control measures have had significant initial impact on HR activities, with potential adverse effect on progress towards elimination of viral hepatitis.

HR services are resilient and have adapted well.

HR services should be considered essential health services and receive support and resources for their key role in achieving SDGs.
EMCDDA publications on COVID impact

https://www.emcdda.europa.eu/topics/covid-19
Upcoming publications of interest from EMCDDA

- Second European Guide on health and social responses to drugs
- Update on ECDC\EMCDDA Guidance on prevention and control of infectious diseases among PWID
- Guide on drug use equipment
- Manual on Hepatitis testing in drug services
- Hepatitis C barometers for EU countries