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Effective prison-based treatment and linkage to care after release

We read with interest Lara Tavoschi and colleagues' Article on the management of infectious diseases in European prisons.¹ The authors describe the high burden of communicable diseases, including hepatitis C virus (HCV), in European prisons and how prioritising health care in this sector has benefits for both prisoners and the broader community. Similarly, in Australia, there is a disproportionately high HCV seroprevalence among people in prison, reaching up to 50% among those who inject drugs.²

WHO has prioritised the elimination of HCV as a public health threat by 2030,³ and the prison setting must be used to engage prisoners living with HCV in care to achieve these targets. The high prevalence in prisons of both HCV infection and people who inject drugs, and the short average length of incarceration, make prisons ideal for diagnosing infection and providing short-duration, highly effective direct-acting antiviral (DAA) therapy. In this setting, we recently described a nurse-led model of care for HCV treatment in prison that was safe and achieved cure rates greater than 95% among prisoners.⁴ These data endorse Tavoschi and colleagues' recommendations and show that system-wide prison programmes are feasible and effective. Importantly, more than 80% of these prisoners had never engaged in specialist HCV care in the community,

and 68% reported injecting in the month before incarceration. Prison-based health care can engage people who do not traditionally participate in HCV care and interrupt onward-transmission networks.

Another important health-care gap is linkage to care after release from prison. In a pilot study, we evaluated the rate of successful linkage to HCV care among recently released prisoners. All prisoners had a comprehensive HCV assessment while incarcerated and were planned for treatment before release. On release, participants were referred to a local primary care practice with a detailed summary of their clinical work-up to streamline DAA prescription. There were no cost barriers to treatment uptake. The rate of treatment uptake was determined by registration with the national drug authorisation registry, required before DAA treatment can be dispensed. Among 75 former prisoners, only 19 (25%) were prescribed DAAs within 6 months of release. Of these, seven (37%) commenced treatment in prison when re-incarcerated during this period. Re-incarceration was the only predictor significantly associated with DAA initiation.

This period of time immediately after release from prison can be challenging, characterised by competing priorities including renegotiating social networks, finding stable accommodation, and managing recidivism.⁵ There is a need for new models of care to optimise linkage to care after release from prison for this vulnerable population.

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Timothy J Papaluca, George Tambakis, David Iser, *Alexander J Thompson
alexander.thompson@svha.org.au

Department of Gastroenterology, St Vincent's Hospital and the University of Melbourne, Fitzroy, VIC 3065, Australia

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Living in the shadows of hepatitis

Viral hepatitis is a substantial public health problem with an annual mortality rate of 1.34 million deaths, which is similar to mortality from HIV (1.1 million) and tuberculosis (1.4 million).¹ The most common causes of viral hepatitis are the five distinct hepatotropic viruses: hepatitis A to E. Hepatitis B and C have been shown to attack the liver and cause both acute and chronic diseases. Globally, an estimated 257 million people have chronic hepatitis B infections and another 71 million suffer from hepatitis C infections.

The prevalence of viral hepatitis infections varies by geographical region, but Middle East and North Africa (MENA) has been identified as the region most affected by viral hepatitis worldwide. The main culprits for this widespread prevalence of viral hepatitis are factors such as socioeconomic conditions, migration, vaccination, and treatment policies. The MENA region shows wide range of viral hepatitis causes, viraemic prevalence, and diversity in hepatitis B and C genotype distributions.² Although hepatitis A and