

Online-mediated HCV-RNA home-based testing to reduce incidence of hepatitis C virus infection among men who have sex with men in Amsterdam, The Netherlands – an initiative of the MC Free project

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DESCRIPTION

In the Netherlands, unlike in many other countries, current transmission of hepatitis C virus (HCV) occurs primarily among HIV-positive men who have sex with men (MSM) as HCV incidence dropped to nearly zero among people who inject drugs (Grady 2012; de Vos 2013). Since 2000, there has been an unexpected and substantial increase in acute HCV infections among HIV-infected MSM. Early testing and treatment of HCV-infected HIV-positive MSM in combination with upscaling of preventive measures may curb the HCV epidemic among this population. As part of the MC Free (Amsterdam MSM Hepatitis C Free) project, aiming to develop an innovative, multilevel strategy to reduce HCV transmission among MSM in Amsterdam, we initiated the NoMoreC strategy for MSM including a C-test-service in its related web-app.

NoMoreC includes online and offline interventions that aim to increase HCV awareness and promote risk reduction behavior and willingness to test. The project web-app at www.NoMoreC.nl offers information, videos and personalized advice on risk behavior and testing options, including a C-test service.

C-test is a low-cost internet-guided home-based testing service for HCV-RNA using dried-blood-spots (home-collection testing involving a certified laboratory). This service allows men at high risk for HCV infection to take control and test on a regular basis using a highly sensitive test for the detection of acute HCV infection. Before ordering a test kit, men can self-assess their risk for HCV using a risk assessment questionnaire, which was validated before its online use (Newsam 2016).

Test kits are sent to a chosen address, and users are instructed to send their self-collected dried blood spot obtained from a finger stick to the laboratory of clinical virology of the Academic Medical Center of Amsterdam for HCV-RNA testing. This method has been validated and shown to be effective (Tuailon 2010).

Test results are communicated via a personal login at the project's website, and online personalized counseling will start immediately. The website will guide users who test positive directly towards additional steps to take, motivating them (a) to access regular health care for further evaluation and medical follow-up as soon as possible, and (b) to initiate partner notification.

PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACT

Home-based testing can decrease barriers to testing as it increases convenience, anonymity, perceived control over the testing procedure and patient autonomy and control over their own health, and decreases time and efforts needed to visit regular health care facilities.

We will launch the testing service in the fall of 2017. We expect that a home-based HCV-RNA testing service including adequate information, instructions, counseling and linkage to care in combination with a web-app that offers tailored preventive information and tools, will increase the uptake of testing and engagement in preventive behaviours among MSM.

WHY IS THIS INNOVATIVE?

Since the reduction of HCV transmission among MSM is determined by the extent to which HCV infections can be diagnosed on time, successfully treated or prevented altogether, we intervene outside the clinical settings in the MSM community, aiming at MSM at risk for HCV.

The sensitive HCV-RNA test allows men to identify their HCV infection at an early stage. The NoMoreC web-app links men testing positive to care. The C-test service is aligned and closely linked to online and offline interventions that aim to increase awareness and promote risk reduction behavior.

Finally, the NoMoreC-strategy is developed in close collaboration with men from the target group, via focus groups, a campaign team consisting of community members and a community advisory board.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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