Evaluation of an Educational Comic on Harm Reduction for Prison Inmates in New South Wales

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to educate inmates about harm reduction measures as a first step towards the reduction of hepatitis C transmission in prison. An educational Comic was developed and covered a range of relevant topics. A Survey was included in the Comic to assess inmates’ knowledge. There was a very high level of knowledge among inmates who took part in the Survey, but the response rate was very low. It appears that Comics are a useful medium for the education of inmates about harm reduction measures, but education alone is insufficient. Inmates need to be provided with the means for prevention.

Keywords: Harm Reduction; Prison; Inmates; Hepatitis C; Educational Comic

INTRODUCTION

At least one third of prisoners in New South Wales (Butler, Dolan, Ferson, McGuinness, Brown, and Robertson, 1997 and Victoria (Crofts, Stewart, Hearne, Ping, Breshkin and Locarnini, 1995) are positive for hepatitis C virus (HCV) antibodies. HCV infection in prison entrants was significantly associated with a history of injecting drug use, sharing of injecting equipment, previous imprisonment, tattooing and age over 25 years (Butler et al., 1997). Several cases of HCV transmission in NSW prisons have been reported (Haber, Parsons, Harper, White, Robinson and Lloyd, 1999; Post, Dolan, Whybin, Carter, Haber and Lloyd, 2001). In contrast HIV prevalence remains very low among IDUs and among prison entrants in Australia (NCHECR, 2000), though transmission has been documented Dolan & Wodak, 1999).

In order to prevent HCV infection, those at risk need to know how these infections are transmitted and ways to reduce their risk of infection. A recent survey of NSW prison entrants revealed a low level of knowledge about HCV – only 20 percent and two percent nominated injecting drug use and tattooing as risk factors respectively (Butler et al., 1997). Twenty nine percent of inmates reported having “no idea” about the ways in which hepatitis can be transmitted. However, knowledge was significantly better among those who had been imprisoned previously than those who had not, suggesting that inmates were being educated about hepatitis C (Butler et al., 1997).

The combination of a high prevalence of hepatitis, wide spread risk behaviours and poor knowledge of the risk factors for HCV transmission is cause for concern. This study reports on an evaluation of an
educational Comic designed to educate prison inmates about harm reduction and in particular risk factors for hepatitis transmission.

METHOD

Given that most inmates have a low level of education (Butler, 1997) it was decided to use a comic format to provide information about harm reduction measures. The 48 page Comic, *Skin Deep!* was developed by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and the NSW Department of Corrective Services. Focus groups were held with prisoners to determine any areas of misunderstanding inmates may have and to suggest story lines that would reflect prison life. The Comic contained four stories which portrayed male, female and Aboriginal inmates as well as specific information related to hepatitis, HIV and drug injecting. The Comic contained very explicit language and the illustrations were very graphic in their portrayal of sex, violence, drug injecting and tattooing.

The first story, *Blood Simple* addressed the use of bleach as a way to clean injecting and tattooing equipment. Two simultaneous scenes were played out in a male prison. One scene highlighted the importance of cleaning all tattooing equipment with bleach and using disposable rubber gloves. It also compared prison and professional tattoos in terms of health risks and quality. The other scene addressed two inmates preparing to inject. One was desperate to inject but unable to find a vein. This delay meant the other inmate had to rush his injection as the muster bell was ringing (See Illustration 1).

*Think Again* described a scene of three male inmates preparing to use heroin. Two chose to inject it while the other decided to chase it (inhale the vapours). They discuss the possibility of acquiring hepatitis C from the injecting paraphernalia and the benefits of non-injecting routes of administration of drugs. Eventually the two injectors agree with the chaser’s viewpoint.

*Ahead of the Dread* portrayed two male Aboriginal inmates. One was about to be released and has had numerous encounters of unprotected sex in prison. The other inmate persuaded him to have an HIV test for the sake of his wife and family. The result of the HIV test was positive and he attempted suicide. His friend helps him through the crisis before he is released.

*Just a Little Prick* depicted a group of female inmates, some of whom have HIV or hepatitis C infection. One inmate took another’s hidden syringe and used it without knowing that the last person to use it was HIV positive and had not cleaned it. The main message highlights the benefits of being supportive of HIV and HCV positive prisoners to protect against further transmission.

Other information included in the Comic was: the existence of different strains of HCV, health and social consequences of HCV infection, a graphic of the new ‘2x2x2’ method of cleaning needles and syringes, nutrition, statistics on HCV and medical complications, explicit graphics and written instructions on how to use condoms and dental dams and a graphic on the relative dangers of various injection sites in the body. There was also an advertisement for services offered by the HIV and Health Promotion Unit, NSW Department of Corrective Services.

A Survey was included in the Comic to test inmates’ knowledge (see Table 1). Inmates were required to decide whether the four statements were True or False and send their entries via the free post system to the HIV and Health Promotion Unit. A cash prize of $200 was offered for the first correct entry for each of the four statements. The competition ran in 2000, with each statement being assigned a three-month period in which the entries were to be returned. The competition was staged over an 11 month period to encourage inmates to keep the Comic and refer to it every few months. The four statements covered key pieces of information considered to be less known within the target population, but were contained within the Comic. A total of approximately 9,000 Comics were distributed across 26 prisons in New South Wales.
RESULTS

Two hundred responses were received from a total of 20 prisons giving a response rate of two percent (Table 1). All entries except one were correct (99.5%).

Table 1
Responses to “Skin Deep” Comic Evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>No. of Entries</th>
<th>No. of Correct Entries</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You can get more than one strain of the Hep C virus.</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a gaol tatt is just as safe as getting a professional tatt.</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dams and condoms are used for safer oral sex.</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Injecting heroin is safer than smoking it.</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>199</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

Findings from the research reported here indicate that knowledge on a range of harm reduction topics was very good among those inmate respondents who entered the competition. Only one inmate sent in an incorrect answer in relation to different strains of hepatitis C. However the response rate was very low and whether the sample was representative of the NSW prison population is unknown.

Nevertheless, the overwhelming proportion of correct entries suggests that the inmates had read the Comic and were able to understand the information contained within the Comic. Given previous research into inmates’ lack of knowledge of this area (Butler et al., 1997), it may be concluded that the Comic increased inmates’ awareness of harm reduction in prison. Whether this increase in knowledge is translated into behavioural change remains to be seen. While knowledge alone is insufficient, it is a precursor to protection from infection.

The main limitation would have to be the very low response rate and the lack of demographic data on the respondents which would have allowed some insight into representativeness. A similar survey of inmates also achieved a very low response rate (Dolan, Lowe and Shearer in press) but it was thought the addition of a monetary prize would rectify this. There may have been delays with the distribution of the Comic or the inmates may have not seen the Survey until it was too late. There was no mention of the Survey on the cover of the Comic to draw attention to it. Although the structure of the Survey allowed only one inmate to respond to each statement it is possibly that more than one person read each Comic.

To our knowledge this is the first time a comic has been used to educate inmates about harm reduction measures. The very high proportion of correct responses may offer an indication that a Comic book format may serve as an attractive, user-friendly medium to communicate information on harm minimisation to this population, which has lower than average levels of education (Butler, 1997).

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