Luck, chance and good fortune: Accounts of long-term injectors staying safe from hepatitis C in Melbourne

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Transmission of hepatitis C in injecting drug users primarily occurs as a result of exposure to the virus during communal injecting events.

Some injectors in a range of locations globally have been able to avoid HCV infection throughout their injecting careers.

For some this is despite reporting risky injecting behaviours with HCV infected peers.
Networks 2 – (2005 – ongoing)

Prospective cohort study of hepatitis C transmission

- N=207
- 34% female; Av. 25 yrs (range 17-54 years)
- 76% born in Australia; 14% Vietnam injecting for a median of 7 years
- 50% HCVAb/RNA+; 22% cleared; 28% HCV-ve
N2 cohort July 2005-on-going

**Legend**
- ○○● HCV negative
- ●○○ HCV Ab+ RNA– (previously infected)
- ○●○ HCV Ab- RNA+ (seroconverting)
- ●●● HCV positive
Methods - hep C free (injecting >5 yrs)

- Building on established cohort from Networks 2
- N=28 in-depth semi structured in-depth interviews
  - most twice;
- Participants drawn from N2 interviewed between 2-15 times previously
- HCV Ab & PCR negative at baseline
Luck, chance and good fortune

Two main themes from the data for today’s presentation

- Passive luck
- Active and assertive behaviours that enable people to stay hep C free
I think in a lot of ways, it’s like a game of Russian roulette. Obviously the older you get the more careful you are, like I’m nowhere near as reckless as I used to be when I was young ... there comes a point where you can’t see the light at the end of the tunnel ... when you’re full on enmeshed in the using cycle it’s actually a very Zen kind of way of living. You don’t have any regrets about the past, you don’t have any anxieties about the future, you’re living totally in the moment you know. It gets to the point where you don’t treat your life as something special or sacred ... but you get to the point where you take chances.
P: What do you reckon it is that you do that means that you don’t actually get it because you’ve shared your fits in the past haven’t you?

Yeah I have. But I’ve only really shared with my brother because I know he’s had tests I know that he’s clean and I asked him beforehand … are you sure you’re clean because I wasn’t going to risk it. There’s absolutely no way that I would ever, I dunno, maybe it’s a moral thing but there’s no way that I would ever… if someone got the needles mixed up within a group of three and I didn’t know one person I wouldn’t have a hit.
I am there like trying to convince myself not to get it [hep C]. But you know, I just must have been lucky. (Joey, 34 years)
Rowena, 30 years

I mean you can’t say completely 100% every time, and I have done stuff in the past so I’m always relieved. I mean I know the same things have always happened [not sharing any injecting equipment] but you never ever know for sure til you get the result …

I can’t remember how it was mixed up. A fit was present so there you go, I mean it is true and that is luck there but I think hep C wouldn’t have even been talked about or thought about
Yeah I broke the rule and took my luck (Minh, 22 years)

My luck had to run out sooner or later … Yeah. Well I think I’ve scraped by all these years through luck, everything I’ve done. There’s a component of luck in there, it has to be (Tiger, 32 years)

Part of me thinks that you know maybe yeah I have been a bit lucky which I hate to say, but it could be partly that I don’t know (Bronwyn 39 years)

I think I’ve just been lucky because I don’t think I knew much until later on (Jeremy, 36 years)
Limited control over environment

I was in the boarding house and I went about three months running a daily habit and I didn’t pay for a cent of it and all I was doing was hanging around and because I’m small and female people know I’m not going to rip them off so a lot of people would come into town, not know anyone, spot me, ‘do you use? Do you score?’ (Barbie, 37 years)
Actively avoiding hep C

It’s just like, I’m just very lucky to be where I am today. I haven’t caught nothing, I lost all of my property and it’s like I got all this re-given to me so I’m trying to start from scratch again (Paul, 31 years)
… done a lot of work to get to this and I get my $600 a fortnight and the very first thing I do is walk to the bank and put $300 of it in for my rent and bills and then I go and buy my food and my bupe and this and that and then if I’ve got $50 or $100 left over, I’ll go and use

I was so lucky that I got hooked up really early with VIVAIDS, as part of the North Yarra Community Health Service. They used to have an Easy Street drop in clinic and I was part of that. I used to attend every week
No, I would stop, if there is nothing around then I just like I’ll wait until I get home (Whyatt, 32 years)

Yeah like I was lucky I never got on speed or ice years ago when I had the problems because it would have gone a lot worse because I came off heroin for a while, using other stuff and then got into the ice and that and then because I got put on medication to get rid of, because they said I had a chemical imbalance and that took a year and then bupe and then that worked out, come (Paul, 31 years)
I’ve had a pretty sheltered life, like I don’t know anyone who’s overdosed, I’m not close to anyone who’s passed away. Like I’ve known of people who’ve known people and stuff like that and people who lived with but I’ve not ever been in the situation where someone close to me has passed away through drugs so I’m amazingly lucky in that element, and then not to have Hep C I’ve had a very sheltered drug life
Closed Networks

The other thing is like I said, using with similar people all the time, not so much mixing it up and scoring with whoever on the street, having actual people that I was regular with, so always using and hanging with them. (Hannah, 36 years)

No I mean we’re pretty lucky at the moment, the person that we see [for heroin] only sees us and like three other people (Suzi, 41 years)
Actively building on good practice

But I would say that my long term negative status is more to do with luck and good fortune than good practice. That’s different now and I would be surprised to find that I ever will be positive from this point on in my life just because of my level of knowledge and stuff like that. I’d be very surprised and it would be some weird not injecting related exposure. (Barbie 36 years)

Well I’ve been thinking about it a bit after talking to you because I think that it definitely started off as luck but then my awareness grew through my exposure to a variety of different things, particularly in the sector, so my behaviour changed as well. I still had periods of being reckless but in general I think I was much more aware of what I was doing. (Hannah, 34 years)
Active assertive engagement with people who inject
  - As early as possible
Harm reduction remains valid
Amassing capital and resources to avoid hep C
  - How best to do this?