

My experiences as ex-HCV-positive ex-IDU

Eli Zamernik

My story

- In my “previous life” I was a **drug addict**
- In 1995 I was diagnosed to have **chronic hepatitis C**
- In 1997 extreme fatigue, nausea and weight loss emerged but I was **refused treatment** for hepatitis C at the Clinic for Infectious Diseases since I was a drug addict on substitution treatment
- In 1999 at the first public “Roundtable on HCV infection in drug users” in Slovenia I **stood up for my rights in public** and eventually I **got treatment** thanks to prof. dr. Mojca Matičič at the same Clinic where I was previously refused
- In 2001 I successfully finished treatment for hepatitis C – it was definitely NOT easy, but **I was CURED!!!**
- Then: I started **to fight in public** for the rights of drug users to be managed for hepatitis C. I was interviewed in leading newspapers, participated at various conferences and actively cooperated with infectologists...

Treatment of hepatitis C in IDUs TODAY

- Today in Slovenia **EVERY** single IDU can receive treatment for hepatitis C
- The main problem is their readiness for treatment
- I find extremely important the **COOPERATION** between the doctors from the addiction treatment centers, infectologists and the patients themselves. Such a cooperation has been established in the national guidelines but unfortunately in some places in Slovenia it has still not been working well.
- Close and regular follow-up of the patient by infectologist, addiction specialist and psychiatrist team is of the utmost importance to recognise treatment side-effects in time and help the patient finish the treatment
- One of the problems I noticed is also **poor knowledge** of hepatitis C among some medical workers (for example dentists) leading to unpleasant situations of refusing health-care to infected IDUs

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TODAY

- Since 2009 I work at the **NGO Association for Harm Reduction Stigma**, which helps IDUs in various ways
- I cover the field of HCV infection including prevention, counselling, providing information and lecturing in prisons
- I am particularly involved in **giving support to IDUs during the stressful treatment** of hepatitis C
- We organise actions for **free, anonymous HCV testing** in mobile medical vehicles, which has proved to be an excellent opportunity to avoid stigma
- We tried to introduce **needle-exchange programme into prisons** – so far - unfortunately - unsuccessfully
- We wish to introduce some “**shooting rooms**” which we still do not have
- In my opinion there are **more HCV infected drug users** than reported since, for example, official programmes do not reach homeless IDUs, but we do!