A model, screen test and treat hepatitis C elimination project among under-served communities in Islamabad-the federal capital of Pakistan

H. Qureshi[1,*], H. Mahmood[2], N. Ahmed[2], F.Averhoff,[3] A. Abutaleb[4], S. Kottilil [4], L. Lou[5]
[1]Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination Pakistan, [2] Integral Global [3] Abbott Diagnostics, [4] University of Maryland, [5] John C. Martin Foundation

INTRODUCTION

Pakistan has a large burden of hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection, and access to care and treatment is limited. In order to increase access for underserved populations, a same-day testing and treatment initiation model program for adults in marginalized communities (i.e slums) in Islamabad was launched on March 02, 2019.

AIM

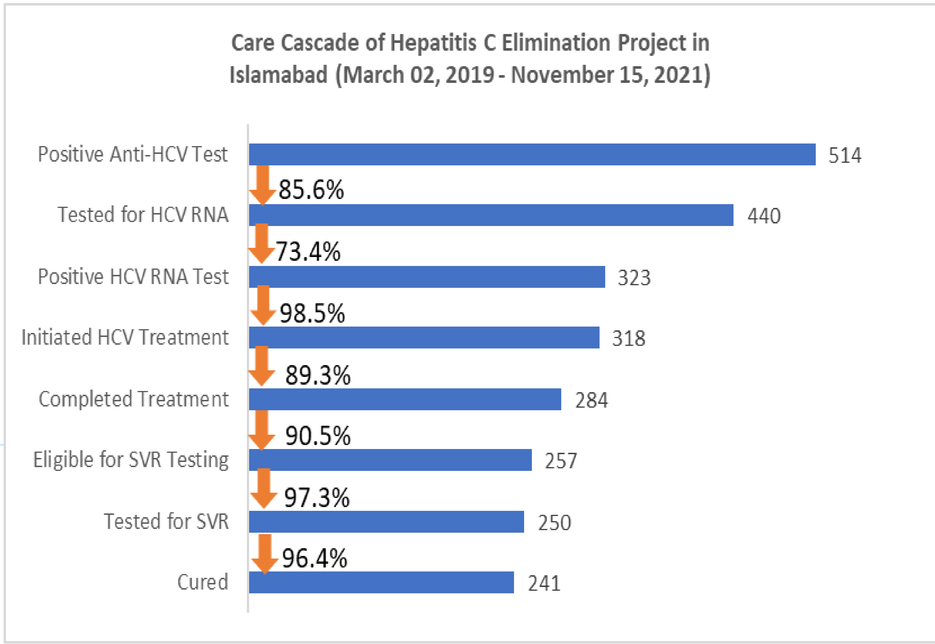
The aim of the project was to eliminate Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) infection among the underserved communities living in the urban slums of Islamabad-the federal capital of Pakistan.

METHOD

A total of 17 slums with an estimated total population of 50,000 in Islamabad were selected by the Ministry of National Health Services, Regulations and Coordination for the project. This project included free hepatitis C testing and treatment and utilizes trained community health workers (CHWs).

METHOD (CONTD.)

The CHWs visited every dwelling in the slum and offer household members aged ≥12 years screening for hepatitis C by a rapid hepatitis C antibody (anti-HCV) test. Those that test positive were referred to an established clinic for diagnosis of active HCV infection (RNA) by GeneXpert. RNA results were made available to patients within two hours . If found to be HCV RNA Positive, the Aspartate to Aminotransferase (AST) to Platelet Ratio Index (APRI) was calculated, subjects received counseling, and their first 4-week supply of sofosbuvir plus daclatasvir and the first of three doses of hepatitis B vaccine during the initial clinic visit. A treatment regimen of 12 weeks for non-cirrhotic (APRI<1.5) patients was prescribed. Patients with an APRI ≥1.5 were referred to specialists. Patients were seen every 4 weeks at the clinic and given refills on their medications and queried about adverse reactions, until the end of treatment. RNA testing was conducted at 12 weeks following completion of treatment to determine viral clearance (cure). The CHWs ensured referral and follow-up of HCV infected persons.



Note: Total Number of Individuals Tested for HCV Infection is N = 24,216

RESULTS

As of November 15, 2021; a total of 24,216 participants were screened from seventeen slums, 514 (2.12%) tested positive for anti-HCV and were referred to receive testing for HCVRNA. Of those, 440 (85.6%) got tested for HCV RNA and 323 (73.4%) had detected RNA. Three hundred and eighteen individuals (98.5%) had initiated treatment, of which 284 (89.3%) had completed treatment. To date, 257 (90.5%) patients were eligible to test for Sustained Virologic Response (SVR), out of which 250 (97.3%) were tested; 241 (96.4%) were HCV RNA negative, four (1.6%) were loss to follow up and five patients were (2%) HCV RNA positive. Those five patients were given Sofosbuvir and Velpatasvir and are on treatment

CONCLUSIONS

Same day hepatitis C testing and treatment initiation is feasible among underserved communities in urban slums in Pakistan. CHWs can be effective in reaching “hard-to-reach” populations with limited access to health services and achieving high rates of linkage to care and adherence with treatment for hepatitis C.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Dr. Huma Qureshi, National Hepatitis Focal Point, Pakistan
Email: drhumapmrc@gmail.com
Dr. Hassan Mahmood, Integral Global, Pakistan.
Email: Hassan@integralglobal.net
Nabil Ahmed, Director, Integral Global, United States
Email: nabil@integralglobal.net