Use of alcohol swabs to clean injecting sites amongst people who regularly inject drugs in Australia

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Soft tissue infections are common amongst people who inject drugs

- Abscesses, cellulitis
- Current/past month prevalence 6-32%
- Complications: endocarditis, sepsis
- Impact on quality of life:
  - Pain
  - Embarrassment (odour, appearance)
  - Stigma and discrimination when accessing care
Swabbing injecting sites with alcohol wipes reduces soft-tissue infections

- Often included in equipment distributed by needle and syringe programs (NSP)

- But little attention is given to injecting hygiene in most harm reduction settings
  - HIV, hepatitis C, overdose prevention are priorities
Aims

1. Prevalence of swab use prior to injecting;
2. Correlates of not using swab; and
3. Reasons for not swabbing.
Design: cross-sectional study of people who inject drugs across Australia

- Recruited from NSPs in capital cities in each state
- Injected drugs at least monthly in the past 6 months
- Structured interview on drug use and related issues
Sample characteristics \((n=852)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age (IQR)</td>
<td>43 37-50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median years of injecting (IQR)</td>
<td>23 16-30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug injected most often</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal methamphetamine</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceutical opioids</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other forms of methamphetamine</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Substantial minority reported infrequent use of alcohol swabs

- 28% (n=240) ‘never’ or ‘almost never’ swabbed injecting sites prior to injection

- 26% (n=218) did not swab prior to last injection
Older PWID more frequently used swabs

• More likely to use swabs:
  • Older
  • Longer duration of injecting

• Not associated:
  • Sex
  • Indigenous status
Not swabbing clusters with other injecting risk behaviours

- Non-swabbers more likely to report:
  - Distributive needle sharing
  - Receptive needle sharing
  - Re-use of own needle

- No association with injecting site location
Not swabbing more common among people injecting methamphetamine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Drug Type</th>
<th>Did not swab (%)</th>
<th>Adjusted OR (95% CI)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Heroin</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pharmaceutical opioids</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1.2 (0.8 – 1.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal methamphetamine</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1.8 (1.2 – 2.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other amphetamine</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0.2 (0.1 – 1.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0.4 (0.1 – 2.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Among non-swabbers, seemed to be a lack of awareness of injecting hygiene

- Two-thirds of non-swabbers just “don’t bother”

- Other themes:
  - In a hurry
  - Already clean
  - Small number perceived it as harmful
    - Possible that some are using after injecting – “it stings”, “it burns and is painful”
Need for increased awareness of injecting hygiene in preventing soft tissue infections

- Substantial minority infrequently or never clean injecting sites
- Not a deliberate omission – just not seen as important or a priority
Focus on younger/recent initiates and users of crystal methamphetamine

- Overlap between these two groups in Australia
- Crystal methamphetamine associated with binge drug use
  - Increases likelihood of a range of injecting and sexual risk behaviours
Needle and syringe programs can promote the use of swabs and injecting hygiene

- Injecting hygiene receives relatively less attention than other harm reduction needs

- Improving injecting hygiene likely to have highly salient impacts on vein health and skin health – can help to build trust and relationships
Supervised injecting sites also encourage hygienic injecting

- Increase access to nurses and health education officers

- Longer engagement increases opportunity for rapport building

- These supportive environments can be habit forming, and promote sage injecting both onsite and outside of facilities.
Summary

• More than half of the sample swab

• A significant proportion could benefit from swab promotion

• NSPs and peer-run educational messaging could enhance reach of swab promotion

• Increased evidence for increased structural interventions
Thank you

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