Barriers and facilitator to COVID-19 vaccination among Australians who inject drugs: how can we maximise uptake?

Olivia Price1, Paul Dietze2, Lisa Maher3, Gregory Dore4, Mallory Trent5, Rachel Sutherland6, Antonia Karlsson1, Julia Uropova7, Udesha Chandrasena8, Daisy Gibbs9, Rosie Swanton10, Caroline Salom11, Simon Lentini12, Raimondo Bruno13, Louisa Degenehardt7, Michael Farrell14 and Amy Peacock1

1 National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, Australia
2 Burnley Institute, Melbourne, Australia
3 Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, Australia
4 University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia
5 National Drug Research Institute, Curtin University, Perth, Australia
6 Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Background

• Widespread uptake of COVID-19 vaccination is vital to mitigate morbidity and mortality during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.
• As an under-served population with high prevalence of comorbid conditions, people who inject drugs (PWID) are at high risk of adverse outcomes from COVID-19.19
• PWID have low rates of vaccine uptake19 and completion19 for other diseases and may face barriers to COVID-19 vaccine access due to economic and social disadvantage.
• Establishing acceptability, barriers and facilitators to COVID-19 vaccination is important to optimise uptake among PWID.

Methods

• The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) includes annual surveys with PWID in each Australian capital city.
• To be eligible, people must be at least 18 years of age, have injected drugs at least monthly in the past 6 months, and have resided in an Australian capital city for at least 10 of the last 12 months.
• Participants provide informed consent and are reimbursed AUD 40 for their time.

One in ten (10%) participants had received at least one COVID-19 vaccine dose at time of interview

Of the 786 unvaccinated participants, half (54%) were hesitant to receive the COVID-19 vaccine

Statistical analysis

In an adjusted logistic regression model, participants who had received a current season influenza vaccination or resided in ACT or NT (compared to NSW) were more likely to be COVID-19 vaccine acceptant

There was substantial heterogeneity in potential facilitators for vaccination

• The most commonly endorsed facilitators were financial incentives, restrictions placed on government benefits and side effects proven to be minimal.
• However, one-third of vaccine hesitant participants reported that none of the potential facilitators would increase their likelihood of receiving the vaccine.

Implications

• COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among this sample of PWID (52%) is higher than that of the general population (range 22–32% in surveys during the IDRS interview period)4.
• Unstable housing was associated with vaccine hesitancy, which was concerning given the attack rate of SARS-CoV-2 may be higher among people experiencing homelessness5; this could be considered for COVID-19 vaccine rollout.
• The prevalent vaccine concerns and misconceptions, as well as low risk perception of disease among vaccine hesitant participants, suggest any intervention implemented to increase vaccine uptake among PWID should include education about the safety of the vaccine and its utility in preventing what can be a severe disease. Importantly, barriers relating to risk perception of disease may have changed as the pandemic situation in Australia worsened after the 2021 interview period.
• The heterogeneity of vaccination facilitators indicates there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ intervention to increase uptake among the PWID population. However, it is possible that provision of financial incentives to be vaccinated could increase uptake (as has been successful for improving hepatitis B vaccine completion among PWID19).
• As the pandemic evolves in Australia, it is essential to monitor vaccine uptake among PWID to ensure they are not left behind and are protected against a disease they may be particularly vulnerable to.

References

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Policy Brief

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For more information, please email: covid@unsw.edu.au