

HIV knowledge, drug use behaviour and infection status of ethnic minorities drug users attending methadone clinics in Hong Kong

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Background

Increasing number of HIV infections among non-Chinese, especially South Asian, drug users were diagnosed under the Methadone Universal HIV Testing Programme (MUT) in 2006. The information on this sub-population, including their HIV knowledge, risk behavioural patterns, was nearly unavailable. This survey is to assess the HIV knowledge of ethnic minority drug users and map out their risks behavior pattern and HIV prevalence.

Methodology

All non-Chinese attending 20 methadone clinics in Hong Kong during July and August 2006 were recruited. They were interviewed by attending doctors using a standardized questionnaire on HIV knowledge, behavioural risk pattern, such as injecting drug use, needle sharing, sexual history and condom use. Those who did not participate in MUT in 2006 were asked to leave a urine sample for HIV testing in an opt-out approach. The urine was tested by Government Virus Unit, Public Health Laboratory Service, Department of Health employing the IgG Antibody Capture Particle Agglutination Test, and then confirmed by Western Blot.

Results

210 subjects were successfully interviewed. Nepalese (59%) and Vietnamese (18%) were the major ethnic groups and clustered at several clinics. Over 80% could not correctly answer all 6 questions on HIV knowledge. Nearly half of respondents had a misconception that HIV status could be distinguished by appearance. The knowledge of Nepalese was poorer than Vietnamese ($p < 0.05$). One fifth of Nepalese drug users could not correctly point out that HIV can be transmitted through needle sharing. Forty percent of Nepalese drug users did not know condom effectively reduced the risk of HIV transmission.

The proportion of ever injector was 45%. The mean duration of injection history was 8.6 years, which was less than that of local Chinese drug users. They usually began to inject in Hong Kong, instead of their home countries. One fifth of injectors have shared needle or equipment locally, but mainly with non-Chinese. Forty-nine respondents (23%) took heroin with other drugs, such as cough mixtures, Marijuana, at the same time.

The HIV prevalence of ethnic minority drug users was 1.5% (95% confidence interval : 0.431% - 4.048%), which was about five times higher than the overall prevalence of all methadone clinic attendees (0.36% in 2006). ($p < 0.05$, OR: 4.97)

Discussion

This is the first survey assessing the need and HIV risk of non-Chinese drug users in Hong Kong. The knowledge of ethnic minority drug users was poor. Needle sharing among these populations was not uncommon, especially in Nepalese heroin users, but mainly limited in their populations. The significantly high HIV prevalence in ethnic minority drug users demonstrated the urgent need of culturally specific HIV prevention programme in these populations.

However, this survey was limited by the language barrier and inconsistency of behavioural data provided by drug users was common. No data on the coverage of methadone programme among non-Chinese local drug users was available. The generalisability of these data was thus unknown.

Ethnic minorities should be a priority for HIV prevention in drug users. Basic HIV education programme might have a significant impact in this knowledge poor population. The coverage of methadone programme in non-Chinese, especially South Asian, heroin users need to be assessed.

Poor knowledge on HIV		
Questions about HIV	% of Nepalese cannot give a correct answer	% of Vietnamese cannot give a correct answer
Minimal number of sex partners	49%	24%
Using condom	42%	16%
Healthy looking and HIV status	50%	43%
Mosquito bite	38%	57%
Sharing meal	37%	16%
Sharing needle	20%	3%
MTCT transmission (female only)	40%	0%

Drug Use Behaviour					
	Nepalese	Vietnamese	Indian	Others	Total
Ever inject	30%	65%	75%	64%	45%
Always use new needle	74%	69%	83%	76%	75%
First injecting in HK	95%	96%	89%	90%	93%
Dosage of methadone Mean (range)	37 (0-90)	42 (2-100)	41 (15-80)	52 (0-100)	40 (0-100)
No. of days attending MC in Previous 28 days	22 (0-28)	18 (0-28)	18 (0-28)	19 (0-28)	21 (0-28)

Drug Use Behaviour					
	Nepalese	Vietnamese	Indian	Others	Total
Ever shared in HK	11(30%)	2(8%)	1(11%)	5(22%)	19(20%)
Shared with Chinese	1	1	1	3	6
Shared needles in recent 3 months	4 (2-3times)	1 (2times)	0	0	5
Ever shared outside HK	1	0	0	1	2
Also take drugs other than heroin	33%	3%	17%	16%	24%
Satisfied with the methadone dosage	95%	100%	100%	100%	96%