Reviewer's report

Title: Socio-demographic determinants of coinfections by HIV, hepatitis B and hepatitis C viruses in central Italian prisoners

Version: 2 Date: 10 July 2007

Reviewer: Katharine Poundstone

Reviewer's report:

General:

The purpose of the research undertaken by the authors is clear and descriptive, simple and worth sharing with other readers concerned about prison health, HIV and blood-borne infections.

Major compulsory revisions:

None

Minor essential revisions:

# The paper needs a thorough edit by a native English speaker

# Background section:

# Add references to this statement: “Most studies show that HIV infection leads to more aggressive hepatitis C…” (paragraph 1). Also, does “most studies” mean that some studies do not show this?

# There are 2 lonely sentences in this section on treatment: “Coinfection can complicate treatment. People with liver damage due to chronic hepatitis are more likely to experience hepatotoxicity related to anti-HIV drugs”. Please expand this a bit. This is a major concern for prison health officials dealing with infected prisoners who need treatment, and it is worth further discussion both in the Background section and in the Discussion section.

# The Background section can be condensed by deleting the section from “Considering the spread…” to “guaranteed by the Constitution for health services”. This is a simple epidemiology paper, and this content is not needed or helpful to the understanding of what follows.

# Methods section:

# Under “Study design and setting” delete “in which the importance of the problems concerning the research had been pointed out” (not informative)

# Mention as early as possible that all study participants were MALE. This was not immediately obvious.

# Results section:

# This reviewer suggests adding a table before ‘Table 1’ describing the sociodemographic characteristics of the study population. Currently, the Results
section lists these characteristics in text form, which is boring to read and not nearly as clear as a table.

# The authors should clarify the issue of polydrug use among the study population. On page 8 of the manuscript, for example, the authors note that 479 prisoners were drug addicted at the time of incarceration, and 52 were recovered from addiction. In the next paragraph, the authors indicate that 429 individuals were heroin dependent, 264 cocaine dependent, and 245 were methadone consumers. The numbers just don’t add up to 479 + 52. Is this because of polydrug use?

# Discussion section:

# There is some extraneous content in this section. I would suggest deleting paragraph 4, beginning with “It is interesting…”

• “It is interesting to note that the high prevalence of smokers among the prisoners appears to be a factor associated with HBV, HCV and HIV positivity…” Is this interesting? Surprising? Relevant to treatment? Rather than simply saying “it is interesting”, the authors should explain why this is relevant, or just delete it.

• Likewise, the detailed description of the paper by Shewan et al. is not necessary and does not contribute to the discussion. What is needed in the Discussion section is more discussion based on the authors’ understanding of their own local drug scene, epidemiological situation, historical trends, etc – not a review of the literature.

# Another lonely sentence: “In Italy HIV positivity of inmates, at their time of entry into prison, doesn’t appear perceptibly high, as verified in other environments” – what does this mean? Perhaps there is a language problem here, but it’s not clear why this is included in the discussion.

# Strange statement: “The second fundamental aspect of the preventive strategy against HIV/AIDS in the prison environment is the thorough observance of hygiene rules either general or specific, which are often neglected, even in the most elementary ones” What do the authors mean by “hygiene rules either general or specific”?? What are they implying about HIV, HBV and HCV transmission?

Discretionary Revisions:

• The authors should note differences between jails, prisons, gaols, etc. For the sake of simplicity and inclusiveness, the authors may wish to use the phrase “closed settings” to cover all settings where people are detained by law enforcement authorities.

• The authors may wish to cite WHO and UNODC/WHO/UNAIDS guidelines for prisons health in the Discussion section.

What next?: Unable to decide on acceptance or rejection until the authors have responded to the major compulsory revisions
Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Not suitable for publication unless extensively edited

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.