Reviewer’s report

Title: Outcomes of hepatitis C screening programs targeted at risk groups hidden in the general population: a systematic review

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Reviewer: Scott Holmberg

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Reviewer Comments for Authors

The manuscript represents a thorough review of efficacy of various programs for HCV screening, mainly in the US, UK and France. The review is credible and helpful, and my suggestions for improvement are modest.

Major. The critiques by the authors of the various programs are sometimes “unfair.” As these 67 programs were ‘demonstration projects,’ they would not be expected to have a major demonstrable impact on identifying many of the estimated 130-170m HCV-infected persons worldwide, especially outside the few developed countries where these programs have been tried. We are all frustrated by the lack of metrics for evaluation of the efficacy of these and other prevention programs, but, as the authors note, evaluating the efficacy of these programs is very difficult. Suggestions? Monitoring rates of HCV screening and positivity in the hospital or referral lab? (Most US testing is now done by large commercial referral labs outside the hospitals and clinics—Quest, LabCorps, etc). One “fair” criticism the authors note is that no one has yet looked at the efficacy of electronic reminders/“ticklers” for clinicians. As the US is moving into recommended one-time screening of those in the cohort born 1945-1965, this is also a very potentially useful demonstration project. Another very fair comment, in this reviewer’s opinion, is that diagnosis/screening alone is insufficient and there are even fewer projects assessing ways to successfully link recently diagnosed persons to care. (I think ref 5 gets at this issue obliquely by indicating HCV-positive persons who have no records of follow-up or specialty care for HCV after they test positive.)

Another major issue is that most readers expect a limitations paragraph or two. The authors allude to limitations of their review at a few points in the Discussion, but it helps to have them explicitly stated in one place, usually the penultimate paragraph of the Discussion. One major limitation is that >80% of the projects evaluated occurred in just a few countries—USA, UK, and France.

Minor. Given the many and extensive Tables, the length of this review is very long. Editorial suggestion to either cut tables and/or results: there are some places where Tables and Results text are essentially redundant/repetitive of each other.