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Integration of Pharmacies into the System of Services for Illicit Drug Users: results of a qualitative study



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Background: By selling syringes, pharmacies play an active role in reducing the risk of transmitting infectious diseases among problem drug users and, subsequently, in the general population. This research is a sub-study of the project “The Role of Pharmacies in the Prevention of Infectious Diseases among Intravenous Drug Users”. **Aims:** To determine the capacity and willingness of pharmacies to offer a wider range of drug services, especially harm reduction. **The research questions** were aimed at pharmacists’ approach to drug users, problems which they encounter in their contacts with users, the possibilities of broadening drug services, and support for pharmacists and their education in the area of infectious diseases and drug usage. **Methods:** Semi-structured interviews, inductive qualitative analysis. **Sample:** Staff of 40 pharmacies; purposive, partly stratified sampling from all over the Czech Republic. **Outcomes:** All participants meet drug users and are able to identify them. The material demanded by the users most frequently includes syringes and pharmaceuticals containing pseudoephedrine. The typical contact with drug users does not differ from regular contact with any other client. Problems in contacts with users are isolated; the most prevalent is verbal aggression. Users often require larger amounts of medicaments with pseudoephedrine and pharmacy staff use various policies to prevent users from purchasing larger quantities of these medicines (expert attitude, limitation on the maximum quantity to be purchased, pretending there is an insufficient supply, etc.). Users also use strategies to obtain as many preparations as possible (multiple sources, increasing the number of purchasers, using more sellers). There is no systematic support or education for pharmacists in

the area of infectious diseases and drug usage; the main source of information for them is the internet. According to the respondents, some forms of drug services (giving information, referral to services, and needle exchange) are possible in pharmacies. However, the main obstacle in introducing drug services into pharmacies is the fear of losing clients (and profit). **Conclusions:** The implementation of harm reduction services in pharmacies is feasible but the crucial precondition is a comprehensive policy and, especially, enhancing the motivation, knowledge, and skills of pharmacists and pharmacy owners.

Keywords: public health - pharmacies – intravenous drug users - harm reduction - addictology

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