

COVID-19 vaccine acceptability among people who inject drugs in Melbourne

Authors:

Paul Dietze, Cristal Hall, Lisa Maher, Ashleigh Stewart, Olivia Price, Sione Crawford, Amy Peacock. Please cite as Dietze, P., Hall, C., Maher, L., Stewart, A., Price, O., Crawford, S. & Peacock, A. COVID-19 vaccine acceptability among people who inject drugs in Melbourne. COVID-19 impacts Bulletin No.3 Jan 2021.

Background

People who inject drugs appear to be at an increased risk of poor health, social and economic outcomes related to COVID-19 and associated restrictions^{1,2}. Factors which might increase risk include comorbid medical conditions, social and economic disadvantage, homelessness and housing instability, criminalisation/justice involvement and barriers to accessing health services, along with health risks from behaviours such as smoking that are known to affect disease severity²⁻⁴. Previous work has examined the hypothetical acceptability of candidate vaccines for blood borne viruses such as hepatitis C and HIV by people who inject drugs⁵, and specific work has been undertaken to increase hepatitis B vaccine uptake and adherence in this population⁶. In anticipation of the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, work on vaccine acceptability has been undertaken to help identify barriers to uptake. In the Australian general population, COVID-19 vaccine acceptability appears high, with more than three-quarters of those polled indicating they would be willing to be vaccinated if a vaccine were made available in December 2020⁷. However, research is needed to determine vaccine acceptability among key risk groups who may be particularly vulnerable to COVID-19, such as people who inject drugs. We conducted a survey of 100 people who inject drugs in Melbourne in December 2020 to generate preliminary evidence of COVID-19 vaccine acceptability among this group.

Methods

The Burnet Institute fieldwork team conducted 100 telephone interviews in December 2020 with a sample of people who inject drugs recruited from needle and syringe programs across metropolitan Melbourne within the framework of the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS). To this end a modified version of the IDRS questionnaire was used which included questions on COVID-19 vaccine acceptability. Questions were drawn from the Burnet Institute's [Optimise study](#). In this Bulletin we present preliminary findings describing the responses to these questions.

Initial findings

Vaccine Acceptability

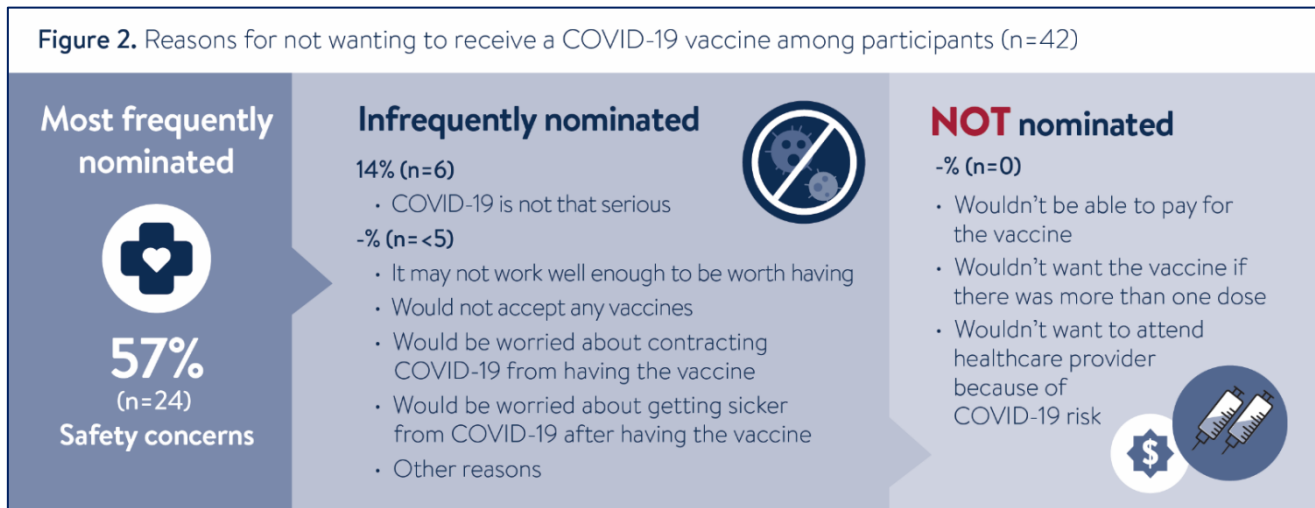
Figure 1 shows that just under half of the sample indicated that they would 'definitely' have the COVID-19 vaccine if available that month, and another 10% said they 'probably' would have the vaccine. However, 15% indicated that they would 'definitely not' have the vaccine, with 20% undecided.

Figure 1. Vaccine acceptability among IDRS participants (n=99)



Reasons for vaccine hesitancy

Figure 2 displays the reasons provided by participants for not wanting to receive the COVID-19 vaccine by those who indicated that they were undecided or would not receive the vaccine (n=42). The most frequently nominated concern was related to vaccine safety (i.e., that it is not safe and has not been tested sufficiently), with a range of other concerns including anti-vaccination beliefs which were nominated infrequently. Encouragingly, no participant nominated fear of contracting COVID-19 from attending a health provider or concerns about needing a second dose as reasons why they would not want to receive a COVID-19 vaccine.



Conclusion

Results suggest that 57% of people who inject drugs in our sample would definitely or probably receive a COVID-19 vaccine if available, significantly lower than the 77% observed in a recent survey of the broader Australian population⁷. The main concern raised by those who indicated that would not want to receive a vaccine related to safety, the concern most frequently raised in surveys of the broader population⁸. Given the potential increased risk of COVID-19 infection, transmission and risk of disease among people who inject drugs and likely poorer health outcomes, education and information dissemination about the safety and efficacy of available vaccines in Australia should be a priority among this group. This work should be undertaken by, or in collaboration with, people who inject drugs and their representatives.



Implications

- In light of the planned rollout of COVID-19 vaccines in Australia, work is urgently needed to inform people who inject drugs about the potential benefits of vaccination, in addition to any risks that emerge as the evidence base for these vaccines develops.
- Future work is required to examine differences in vaccine acceptability according to a range of variables such as age, gender, education, history and patterns drug use, and engagement in opioid agonist treatment (OAT).

For complete details, contact Professor Paul Dietze (paul.dietze@burnet.edu.au).

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