

Caritas Kontaktladen - Hepatitis Shuttle

The project of Kontaktladen and LKH Hörgas-Enzenbach offers low-threshold and free-of-charge access to hepatitis C therapy for drug addicted people using I.V. injections.

Caritas Kontaktladen und Streetwork im Drogenbereich is an established organization working with drug addicted people in Graz, and have worked for many years with opiate addicted, substituted and multiple drug addicted people.

Due to several circumstances, such as the sharing of syringes, difficult access to sterile needles, life-detrimental circumstances (e.g. imprisonment, homelessness), and the unsanitary conditions of drug use, people who use I.V. injections run a much higher risk of getting infected with diseases. One of those is the viral infection hepatitis C. Contrary to widespread belief, hepatitis C is now curable, and is since recently treated with medication which causes barely any side effects.

As previously explained in the project proposal above, for a lot of clients of Kontaktladen, it is hard to be fully open with physicians. They are constantly moving in a grey area, because the substitution drug is supposed to be taken orally; however, I.V. injections are part of the reality of drug addicts, and they contravene against their obligations of regular intake. An infection with hepatitis is therefore proof that they have misused their substitution drug, which increases users' fears of being excluded from treatment, or other such consequences of their misuse. Regardless, to fulfil the mission of harm reduction, Kontaktladen has a project designed to detect appearing hepatitis infections and to treat them, which it has been doing successfully since 2013.

Procedure:

Using the medical service at Kontaktladen, clients can give a blood sample when they suspect a possible hepatitis C infection, or indeed just for the purposes of prevention. The blood is then tested in an external lab and the results go back to Kontaktladen. The doctors there then discuss the results with the clients. In the case of an infection, the client is referred to the monthly hepatitis consultation hour at Kontaktladen with chief physician Dr. Bernd Bauer and his colleagues from LKH Hörgas-Enzenbach. At this initial interview, the client is told everything about the disease, its treatment, and the risks thereof.

Afterwards, the now registered patient is taken to LKH Hörgas-Enzenbach via the organized shuttle (every second Thursday). There, all necessary examinations are performed, the genotype is ascertained, and the patient gets a prescription for the suitable medication. The client must then go to LKH Hörgas-Enzenbach via the shuttle every month to get the next prescription. When the therapy is successfully completed, there is one more follow-up appointment at LKH Hörgas-Enzenbach, and further blood samples which can be taken directly at Kontaktladen.

The regular intake of the medication over several months, as well as the appointments at the LKH, benefit the patients' compliance; furthermore, a remedied hepatitis infection encourages them with a new sense of power to change other aspects of their lives in a positive way.

The project's flexible structure and ongoing support of the well-trained employees of Kontaktladen and LKH Hörgas-Enzenbach awards the clients a life without hepatitis. This, in turn, reduces the stigmatization and social decline of people who belong to a marginalized group due to their drug addiction. A cooperative mission to improve health and quality of life is thereby achieved.