

STEP-C FREE: SUPPORT TO TREATMENT BY ENGAGEMENT WITH PEERS = HEPATITIS C FREE

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Background

- Micro-elimination of HCV entails collaborative efforts between Peer-Support and NHS Nurses, integrating Point-of-Care-Testing (POCT) and Pathway Optimisation in community settings.
- A joint working project (JWP) between NHS Forth Valley (NHSFV) and Gilead Sciences Ltd. (GSL) aims to support the Scottish Government's target of HCV elimination by 2025.
- To achieve micro-elimination, NHSFV targeted hard-to-reach high-risk clients. In 2023, NHSFV and GSL initiated a JWP to streamline the HCV care-pathway and enhance testing and treatment accessibility for those not engaging with routine NHS-services.

Objective

- The project seeks to demonstrate that collaboration between peers and NHS nurses in informal community settings enhances BBV testing uptake and HCV treatment adherence in high-risk populations, ultimately promoting sustained virological response (SVR) at 12 weeks.

Image 1. NHS Nurses with Peers



Methods

- Focus groups identified non-healthcare community venues across Forth Valley. The STEP-C-Free Model, comprising two peer-workers and a community BBV nurse specialist, provided screening using Rapid HCV antibody (Ab) tests. Ab+ individuals underwent a point of care test with a mobile-Cepheid-GenXpert-module. Clients received liver-assessments (fibroscan), venous bloods, Dry-Blood-Spot (DBS) for HIV/HBV. Discussions focused on harm reduction and referrals to additional services. HCV PCR results were provided within an hour, with HCV PCR+ individuals having prescriptions lodged for treatment initiation within a week, supported by peer workers.

Results

- 10.8% of the total population cohort tested positive for HCV RNA
- 31.0% of those HCV Ab+ tested positive for HCV RNA
- 84.0% of those testing positive for HCV RNA started HCV treatment

Table 1. Testing and Results

	Total cohort	Total Cohort (%)	HCV Ab+ Subgroup	HCV RNA+ Subgroup
People Seen	406	100%		
Total Tested (HCV Ab+)	142	34.90%	100%	
Cepheid Tests	132	32.50%		
Cepheid Positive	34	8.30%	23.90%	
Other Tests Positive (Venous/DBS)	10	2.40%	7.10%	
Total HCV RNA Positive	44	10.80%	31.00%	100%
Treated	37			84%
Dropped out	6			13.60%
Spontaneous Clear	1			2.30%

Results

Figure 1. Testing Results for Full Cohort

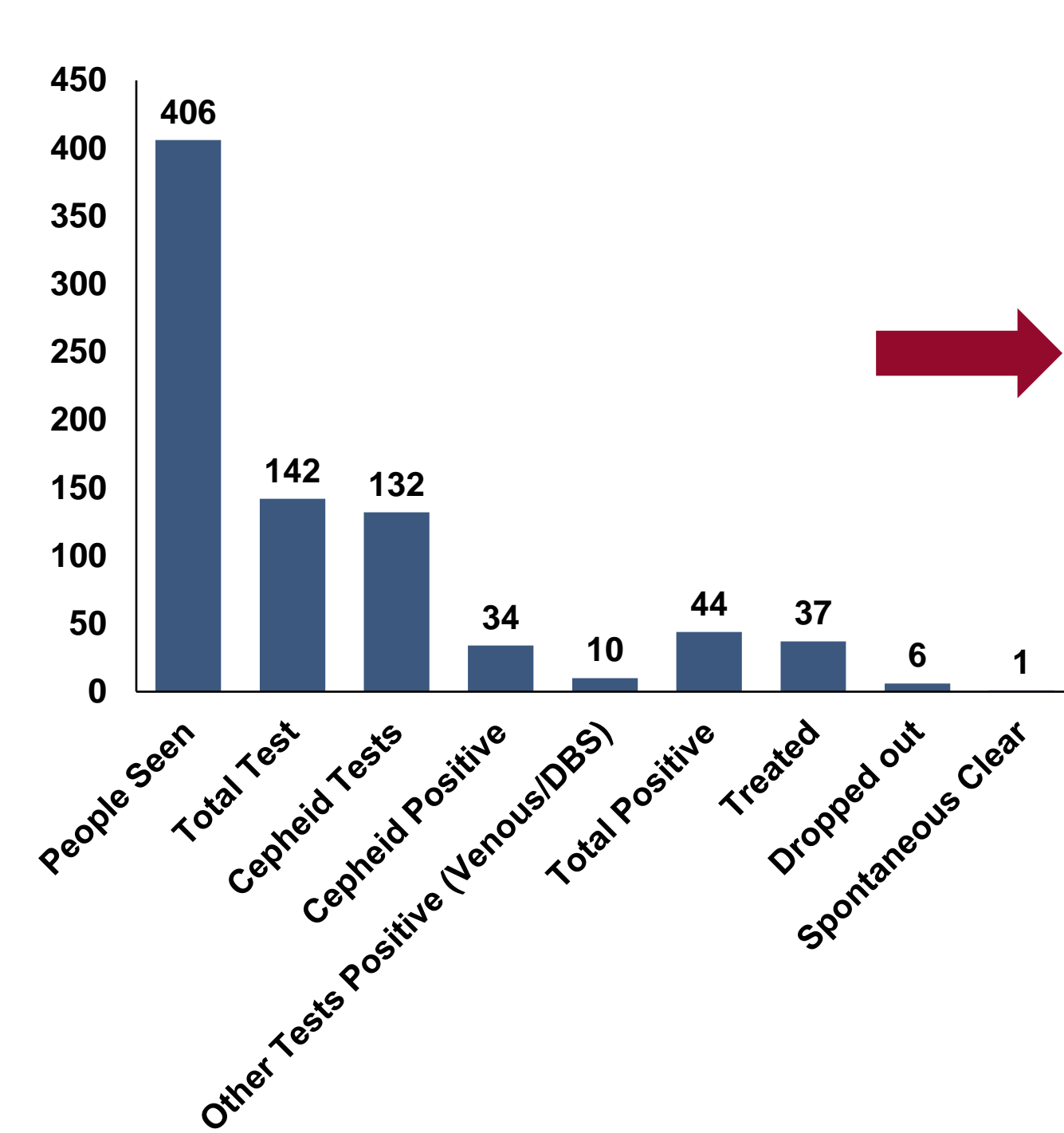


Figure 2. Testing Results for HCV Ab+ Subgroup

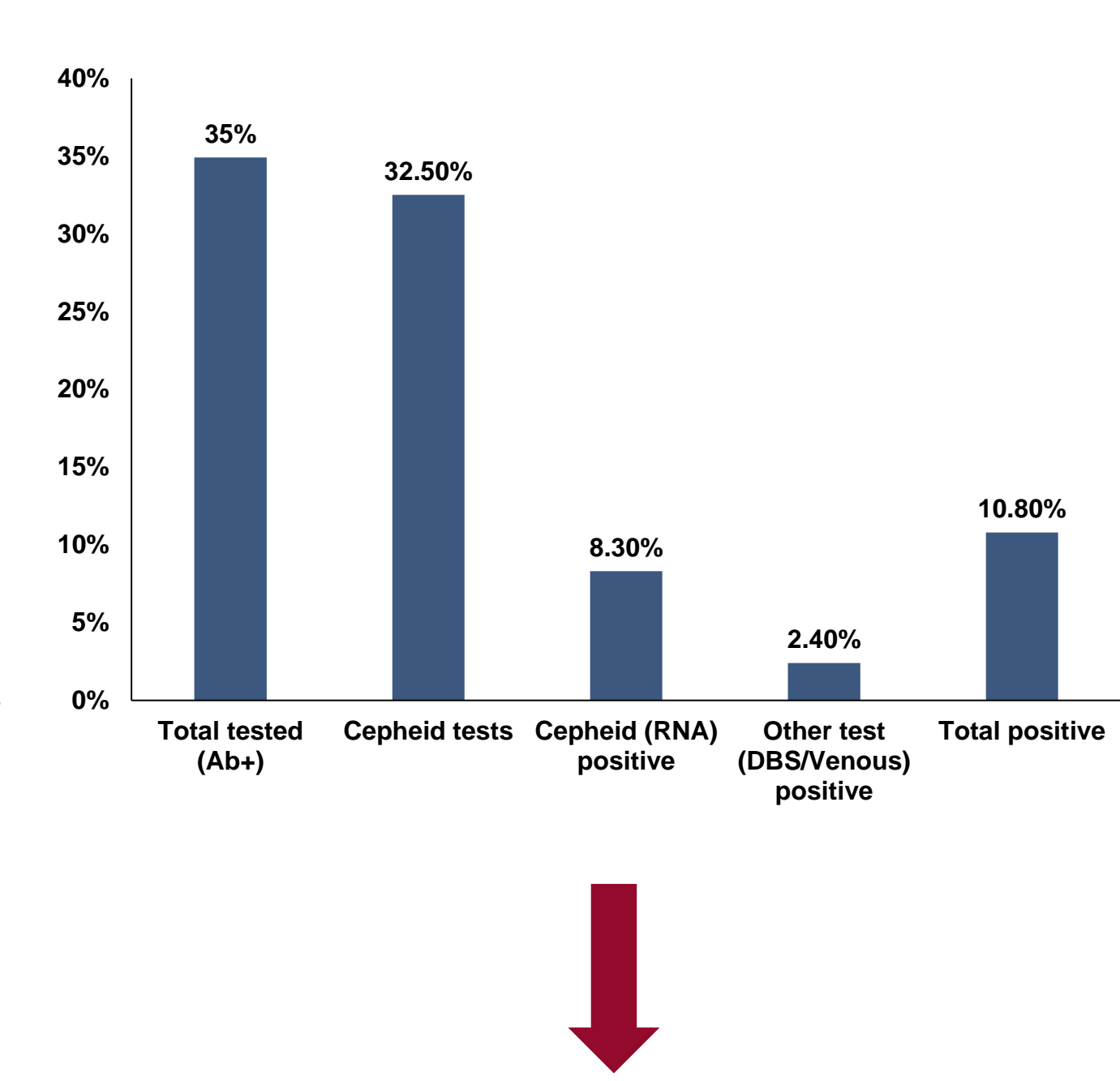
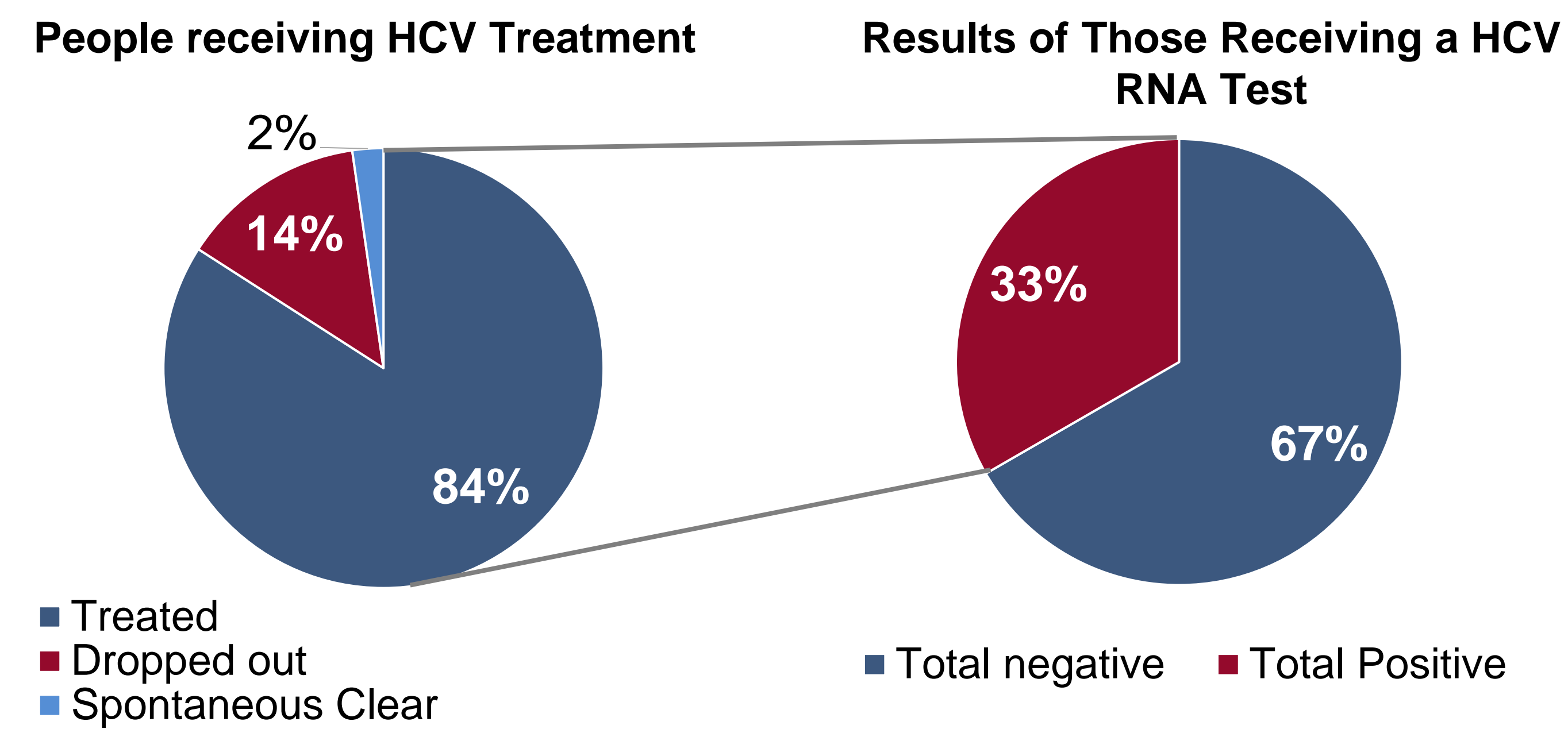


Figure 3. Results of Those Receiving a HCV RNA Test



Shug turned his life around due to STEP C free:

"Without the collaboration brought about by STEP C Free, he would still be living in a house without carpets, nothing to cook on, no bank account and with no support. We have also managed to get another Hep C Trust volunteer who can promote the value of treatment in our communities. I'd say it's been a hugely valuable project."

Feedback from users who cleared their HCV through STEP C Free

"...I was gave your number I felt like you encouraged me and didn't judge me... having that made me feel horrible n like dirty... it's made a big difference coz a feel like I've got someone who is there for support and I can ask questions without feeling stupid or judged"

"...I met Tommy and Lorraine and I'll just say it's changed my life around... it didn't just help me with the infection they supported me with anything I was going through during my treatment I was embarrassed and a bit chaotic to collect and my mentor Tommy would pick the medication up every week post it through my door and even text me to remind me each day to take my medication"



Tommy (Peer Worker) Shug (client) Sheree (Nurse)

Conclusions

Despite routine HCV testing availability in Forth Valley, a segment of at-risk individuals remained underserved. STEP C Free results suggest that peer supported point of care testing and treatment in non-healthcare community settings, effectively engage this population, promoting community involvement and healthcare accessibility. This approach identifies HCV+ individuals swiftly, reducing attrition rates through rapid and supported treatment initiation, while also expanding community outreach and involvement.

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