



# 'It flows you see...': Hepatitis C, love and intimacy

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# Hepatitis C, love and intimacy

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Under construction: The social and cultural politics of hepatitis C

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# Hepatitis C, love and intimacy

## Method

- 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews most but not all of whom identified as current or former injecting drug users, Melbourne, Australia
- Age: 20 – 65 years

# Hepatitis C, love and intimacy

## This paper:

- Hepatitis C impacts on ideas of love and intimacy
- Love and intimacy impact on the ways people respond to hepatitis C
- How do these ideas reciprocally inform one another?
- What can theories of the body offer to conversations about hepatitis C and intimate relationships?

# Hepatitis C, love and intimacy

## The body and desire

- Hepatitis C infection can be embodied as contaminating
- Bodies are inscribed with meaning and represent the social order of things (Foucault, Shildrick, Douglas)
- Broken body of sickness has important consequences for self-perception – the sense of who we are (Shildrick)
- Love and intimacy signify belonging to society in a deep and normal way (Berlant & Warner)
- Desiring normalcy is more powerful than erotic desire, it is woven into desires for love, sexual satisfaction, intimacy and affective relationships (Kittay)

# Response to diagnosis

**Interviewer:** So when you say you're partly responsibly [for contracting hepatitis C], do you mean...?

**Lawrence:** ... *it flows you see*. That's the fatalism thing..., that's what you deserve. I think perhaps there's been some of that, in other things that have gone wrong too. I think some of this is really quite deep stuff that goes back to even to my ... sexuality experience

# Broken body/broken love

- ...I mean I could get sick anytime...I'd hate to get into a relationship and then be a burden...that's not why you get into [them], they're meant to be fun, you're meant to enjoy the other person, not watch them get sick (Stuart)
- ...the shock of it, "I'm not well," , it took away my libido a bit...I think that affected my sense of wanting to share myself physically with someone (Janet)

# Leaky body/leaky logos

**Lucinda:** I just avoided intimacy altogether, 'cause I was like "just stay away from me"...the whole thing was "I'm not even vaguely get close, 'cause at some stage...it will become a problem"

**Interviewer:** Which bit do you think might have become the problem?

**Lucinda:** Just being in a relationship, and blood, I was just convinced that I was some sort of poisonous human being...I just kept thinking at some stage it's gonna be a problem...who wants to be with someone who's toxic for a long time?...there went marriage, there went kids, there sort of went everything.

## 'It flows you see...': Hepatitis C, love & intimacy

well I mean, are you married? How old are you? ... you ever been married?... you ever had any people have a bad reaction to that? Cause I have... *it's all linked*, ... at school... all the guys used to call me a faggot and say I was going to be gay ... and that's always bothered me and I've had that happen ... especially when they know that I'm not married and I don't have a girlfriend (Stuart).

## 'It flows you see...': Hepatitis C, love & intimacy

Well, everything would end...That'd would be enough for me...there's been that kind of fatalism with the hepatitis C up until really around that time he made that decision. And from then, I started to think, well now I want this to go on for as long as possible and do whatever it takes...every minute I can get and that's the first time for many years that I've thought about my life that way really. So the hepatitis C all fitted into that way of looking at many other aspects of my life too (Lawrence)

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## Key points:

- Individuals draw on a range of discourses to make meaning, and ideas of love and intimacy is one of them
- The symbolic associations of hepatitis C as contaminating affects perceptions of the self as no longer normal, and thus not desirable
- Desires for love can be powerful ways people act on themselves to become normal

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## Conclusion and where to from here

- Love and intimacy are important to many people, and their health
- When talking to affected individuals explore embodied responses
  - Ideas of contamination is only one of the ways to talk about intimacy, more research is required
- Little known about how people interpret sexual transmission 'risk'