

Health Protection Surveillance Centre

Introduction

Hepatitis C became a notifiable disease under an amendment to the Infectious Diseases Regulations 1981, implemented on 1st January 2004 (S.I 707 of 2003). Prior to this, cases of hepatitis C could be notified as “viral hepatitis type unspecified”.

Results

There were 331 notifications of hepatitis C in quarter three 2008. This corresponds to a crude notification rate of 7.8 per 100,000 population. This was a decrease compared to the number of cases for Q1 (n=404) and Q2 (n=400) (figure 1).

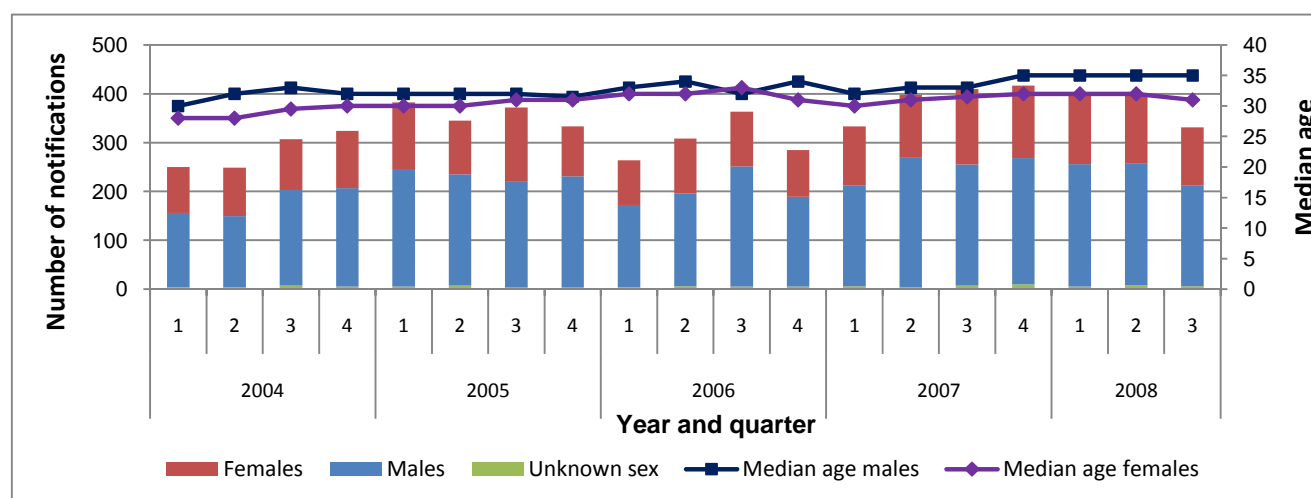


Figure 1. Number of notifications of hepatitis C and median age at notification by sex, Q1 2004 – Q3 2008

Geographic distribution

Notification rates for each HSE area for the past four quarters are shown figure 2. Rates have been highest in the HSE-East every quarter since hepatitis C became notifiable. Seventy six percent (n=253) of Q3 cases were reported by the HSE-East. This corresponds to a notification rate of 16.9 per 100,000 population.

Age and sex

Sixty-three percent (n=207) of Q3 cases were male, 36% (n=118) were female and sex was unknown for six cases. The age distributions were slightly different for males and females. Female cases were younger overall, with a median age at notification of 31 years compared to 35 years for males. Seventy two percent (n=239) of cases were aged between 25 and 44 years (figures 1 & 3).

Risk factor data

Information on most likely risk factor was available for 32% of cases in Q3 2008 (n=106). Of these, 76% (n=80) were injecting drug users, 7% (n=7) had sexual risk factors and 8% (n=8) reported having no known risk factor. Other reported exposures or risk categories included receipt of blood or blood products outside of Ireland, tattooing or piercings outside of Ireland and being an asylum seeker or prisoner.

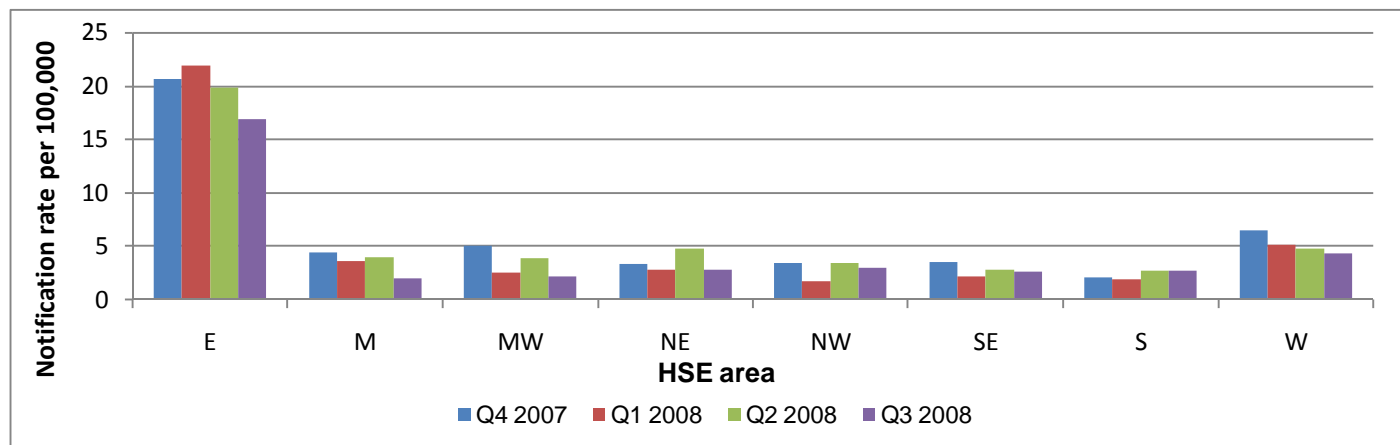


Figure 2. Hepatitis C notification rates per 100,000 population by HSE area for the past four quarters

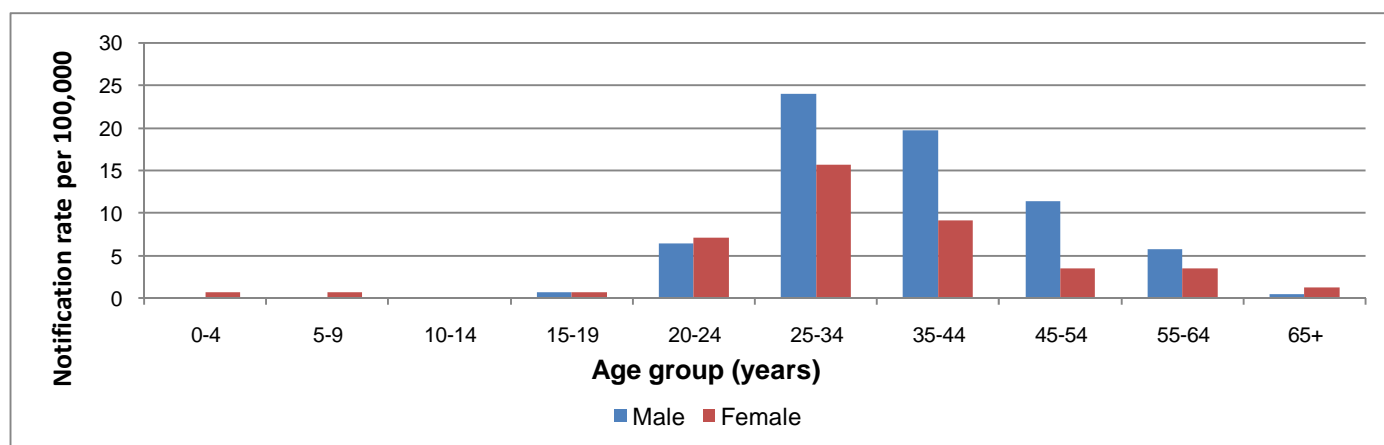


Figure 3. Age and sex specific rates per 100,000 population for hepatitis C notifications in Q3 2008

Discussion

The number of notifications of hepatitis C decreased in Q3 compared to recent quarters. Hepatitis C notification trends can be difficult to interpret. Most cases are initially asymptomatic and cases may have been infected for years before they are diagnosed. Quarterly increases and decreases should be interpreted with caution as notification trends may reflect trends in testing and reporting rather than trends in incidence.

Acknowledgements

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Report by Niamh Murphy and Dr Lelia Thornton, 9th January 2009

Case definition for hepatitis C¹

Clinical description: In symptomatic cases, clinical picture compatible with hepatitis, i.e. discrete onset of symptoms and/or jaundice or elevated serum aminotransferase levels. Asymptomatic cases are common.

Laboratory criteria for diagnosis

One of the following:

- Detection of hepatitis C virus (HCV) specific antibodies
- Detection of HCV nucleic acid from clinical sample

Case classification

Possible: N/A

Probable: N/A

Confirmed: A case that is laboratory confirmed

1. Case definitions for notifiable diseases. Infectious Diseases (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2003 (SI No. 707 of 2003). National Disease Surveillance Centre, February 2004.

All data contained in this report are provisional (CIDR accessed 29th December 2008)