Report on Hepatitis C Notifications in Quarters 1 & 2, 2009

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 328 notifications of hepatitis C in Q1 2009 and 302 in Q2. These correspond to crude notification rates of 7.7 and 7.1 per 100,000 population and are lower than the numbers and rates for Q4 2008 (n=403, 9.5 per 100,000 population) (figure 1).

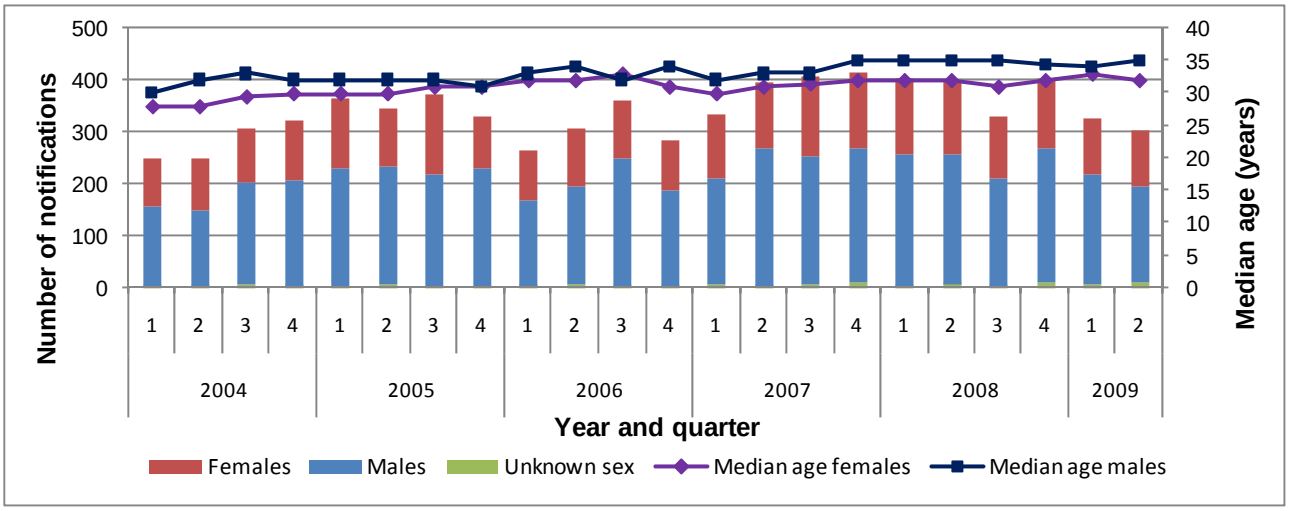

Figure 1. Number of notifications of hepatitis C and median age at notification by sex, Q1 2004 – Q2 2009

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 three percent (n=238) of Q1 cases and 77% of Q2 cases (n=231) were reported by the HSE-East. These correspond to notification rates of 15.9 and 15.4 per 100,000 population.

Age and sex

Sex was known for 97% of cases of hepatitis C notified in Q1 and Q2 2009. Sixty five percent (n=398) were male. The age distributions were slightly different for males and females. Female cases were younger overall, with a median age at notification of 32 years, compared to 34 years for males. Seventy two percent of cases notified in Q1 and Q2 were aged between 25 and 44 years (figures 1 & 3).

Risk factor data

Information on most likely risk factor was available for 44% (n=278) of cases in Q1 and Q2. Of these, 83% (n=230) were injecting drug users, 3% (n=8) had sexual risk factors and 4% (n=10) reported having no known risk factor. Other reported exposures or risk categories included receipt of blood or blood products outside of Ireland or in Ireland in the past, and being an asylum seeker or prisoner.

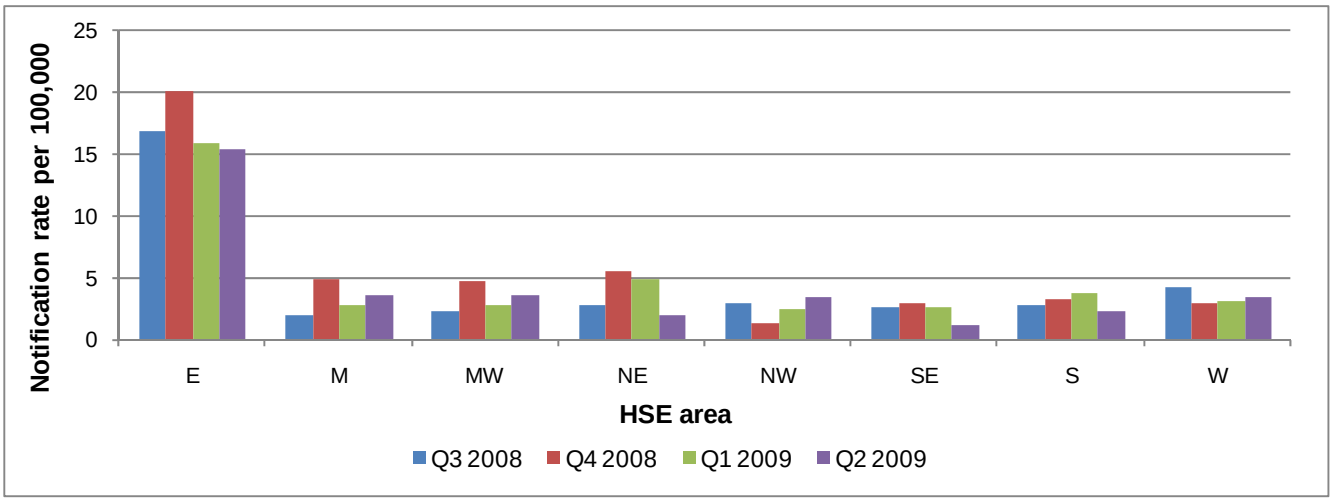

Figure 2. Hepatitis C notification rates per 100,000 population by HSE area for the past four quarters

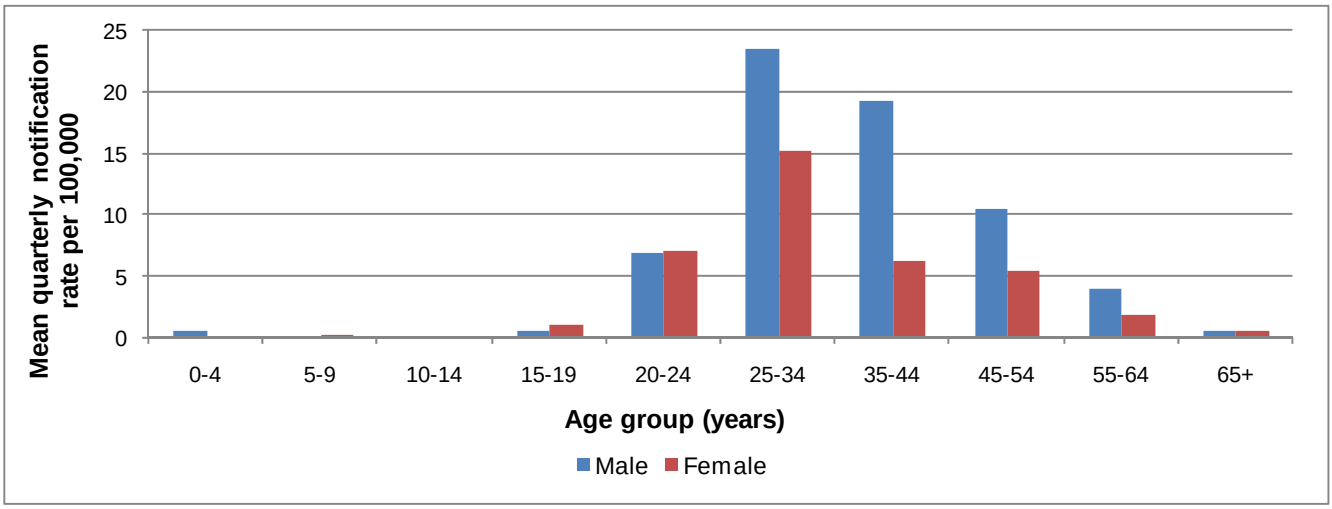

Figure 3. Mean quarterly age and sex specific rates per 100,000 population for hepatitis C notifications, Q1 & Q2 2009

Discussion

The number of hepatitis C notifications decreased in Q1 and Q2 2009 compared to Q4 2008. However, trends can be difficult to interpret as most cases are initially asymptomatic and cases may have been infected for years before they are diagnosed. Where risk factor data were available, the vast majority of cases notified in Q1 and Q2 2009 were likely to have been acquired through injecting drug use.

Acknowledgements

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Case definition for hepatitis C[1]

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 confirmed

Case classification
Possible: N/A
Probable: N/A
Confirmed: A case that is laboratory

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