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Health literacy and antiviral treatment of hepatitis B: A quasi-experimental study of 31 provinces in China from 2013 to 2020

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Objective:

China is a country with a high burden of hepatitis B but a low treatment rate. One of the key reasons for the low treatment rate is inadequate awareness of hepatitis B. Improving the health literacy of the population may help to increase awareness and promote the treatment of hepatitis B. This study analysed how HL contributed to the scale-up of the antiviral treatment of Hepatitis B in China.

Methods: We adopted the two-stage least squares regression and took the mobile phone penetration rate as the instrumental variable to estimate how health literacy affects the scale-up of hepatitis B treatment based on a panel dataset of the overall provincial level of health literacy and the number of 12-month standard hepatitis B antiviral treatment in 31 provinces of China between 2013 and 2020. There was a total of 244 province-year observations.

Results: After controlling the time-invariant inherent attributes of provinces, the regression based on the province fixed-effect model showed that for every 1% increase in health literacy in each province, the number of treatment increased by 7.15% ($0.0715 = e^{0.0691} - 1$, $P < 0.001$).

Conclusions:

Our findings suggest that improved health literacy of the population is an important favourable facilitator for the scale-up of hepatitis B treatment. Improved health literacy may help in building awareness of hepatitis B and understanding individual health status, and forming a healthier lifestyle as well as appropriate healthcare-seeking behaviour. Improving health literacy also supports better service utilization through better knowledge about where care can be accessed among people infected with hepatitis B viral so that they are diagnosed and treated appropriately. Enhancing resource allocation to improve the overall health literacy of the population and to target hepatitis B viral infections with specific knowledge would be a feasible next-step approach to scale up the treatment of hepatitis B in China.

Key words:

health literacy; antiviral treatment; hepatitis B; China; quasi-experimental study

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