

THE POWER OF PEERS: INCREASING THE UPTAKE OF HCV TESTING AND TREATMENT AMONGST PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS

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Background:

In order to increase the uptake of hepatitis C virus (HCV) treatments amongst people who inject drugs, our community model of care overseen by a Nurse practitioner has evolved to include peer workers. A range of tailored peer-driven programs, informed by the experience of our consumers and employing peer workers, have been implemented since 2017.

Description of model of care/intervention:

The programs were developed by identifying appropriate tasks that could be performed by peers, and by educating and training peer workers who were at the frontline. Peer-driven programs included a HCV treatment support program and a HCV peer education program. Other initiatives such as the Testing Initiatives Program, outreach to patient's homes, and expansion of the clinical health service were also implemented to improve treatment accessibility for a geographically dispersed population of at-risk people who do not typically access mainstream health services.

Effectiveness:

One hundred and eight people have received HCV treatment, with 96 of these people receiving HCV peer support. Twenty-five HCV peer educators have been trained with a total of 598 of their drug-using peers being reached in the community. The Testing Initiatives program involved 140 people being tested for Blood Borne Viruses with a subsequent 14 people undertaking HCV treatment. Five peer workers have been trained to perform HCV RNA testing using the Cepheid GeneXPert module instrument.

Conclusion and next steps:

Peer workers foster a high level of trust and engagement, providing an interface between people who inject drugs and health professionals. Task shifting, educating peers, and involving peers in HCV programs has improved engagement with people who inject drugs and increased the uptake of hepatitis C testing and treatment. Increasing peer involvement is integral to improving other aspects of our model of care.