

Supporting HCV Elimination through NUAA Peer Expertise and Health Partnerships - The Peers On Wheels (POW) Project

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Background/Approach: Achieving HCV elimination in Australia will require innovation and adaptability to reach people who inject drugs (PWID), a key affected population. The NUAA Peers On Wheels (POW) trial Project is a mobile, peer-led clinic with HCV point-of-care testing and linkage to treatment, funded by the NSW Ministry of Health.

Analysis/Argument: NUAA Peer Experts are the core of this research, co-designed with the Kirby Institute, NSW Health, and Local Health Districts. POW undertakes client engagement, assessment, and point-of-care HCV antibody and RNA testing. POW operates in spaces such as social housing, community kitchens and community pharmacies, taking HCV testing and treating to where people are situated, away from clinical environments. Partnering with local health services and connecting to their treatment pathways ensures true patient centred care through effective linkage to local clinics (“NUAA-assisted treatment pathways”).

Outcome/Results: Overall, 497 people (median age 44 years; 45% female; 65% Aboriginal and/ or Torres Strait Islander) have received point-of-care HCV testing (607 tests; 413 antibody, 194 RNA) through the POW Project in 7 regional locations to date. 30% report injecting drug use in the previous six months. Overall, 9.5% have current HCV infection (n=47). The empathy and flexible support provided by peer experts is married with cutting edge point-of-care testing technology, breaking down perceived and real barriers that often cause hesitation in seeking healthcare by PWID.

Conclusions/Applications:

Making HCV treatment happen for PWID requires collaboration and partnership. POW represents a paradigm shift in hepatitis C service provision across NSW with peers performing functions previously reserved for clinicians. Due to its success, NUAA will continue to advocate for the ongoing support and expansion of this project to contribute to HCV elimination in NSW by 2028. This Project shows how this model is applicable in many regional areas of NSW where HCV testing and treatment led by Peers are not currently available.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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