

HOW DO NEWLY DIAGNOSED INDIVIDUALS FIND THEIR WAY TO HIV PEER SUPPORT?

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Background:

Peer support has been associated with improved mental health and well-being, increased access to information about treatment and care, increased disclosure of HIV status, and changes in sexual behaviour that reduced the risk of onward transmission. However, we have few data on either the proportion of PLHIV (especially newly diagnosed) who are referred to peer support, or how these referrals are undertaken.

Methods:

We collected data from 113 key stakeholders in six Australian states. This analysis focuses on the interview and focus group data from: community-based informants responsible for the design and delivery of peer support programs; and clinic-based informants who delivered HIV diagnoses, or had contact with people immediately after diagnosis.

Results:

Clinicians, nurses, counsellors and social workers are important sources of referrals to peer support, but self-referral was equally important. Referrals occur in a range of formal and informal ways. Most referrals to peer support from service providers are informal, and are often based on direct contact with community organisations, or specific peer-support workers. Timing of referrals vary, with some providers referring to peer support only after antiretroviral therapy had been initiated, or if the patient has ongoing issues related to coping with a diagnosis. Few formal processes for referral to peer support exist to guide clinic staff. Not all peer support programs collect comprehensive data on demographic, clinical and referral information as part of their assessment/intake processes.

Conclusion:

Referral pathways from clinical services to peer support for people newly diagnosed with HIV are not clearly delineated, resulting in great variation. There is a pressing need for the development of policy—as well as more integrated, automated referral systems—to assist with the standardisation of referrals to peer support. This change could also be supported through reminders provided through the HIV notification process.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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