

PEERS4WELLNESS: INDIGENOUS MODEL FOR SUPPORTIVE HCV AND HIV CARE

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Background: In Canada, the rate of hepatitis C (HCV) is 5X higher for Indigenous people compared to their non-Indigenous counterparts. Indigenous people are over-represented among people who inject drugs (PWID) and are under-represented in HCV care. These inequities are magnified for Indigenous females. Peer navigation (PN) is a promising approach for supportive health care; PN is of particular value in Indigenous contexts due to its wellness resonant elements. The current landscape of PN is lacking a focus on Indigenous people, HCV, co-infection and wellness. This study addresses these gaps.

Methods: Peers4Wellness (P4W) is an Indigenous peer-led community-based participatory study. It involved an assessment of needs for supportive care for HCV and HIV among Indigenous women in Vancouver and Fraser Valley, British Columbia. The study explored the feasibility of applying PN as a springboard for developing a wellness-centered and Indigenous-specific model for supportive HCV and HIV care. This involved consultations with three groups of community stakeholders (n=47): Indigenous women with lived experiences, peer navigators and community organizations. This study applied qualitative Indigenous research methodology, using *Two-eyed Seeing* as a dualistic (Indigenous and Western) research framework. Data collection included Sharing Circles and conversational interviews. Data analysis applied a dualistic thematic content analysis approach.

Results : The findings identified the need and key elements for a wellness-centered and Indigenous-specific model for HCV/HIV peer support for Indigenous women in Vancouver and Fraser Valley. This model is distinct from conventional approaches to PN. It is wholistic, culture-based and designed to promote resilience against the harms of substance use, HCV and HIV.

Conclusion : P4W introduces an innovative Indigenous model for supportive HCV/HIV care to improve the wellness and health care outcomes for Indigenous women in Vancouver and Fraser Valley. We expect that this model will be scalable and transferable.

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