

Not Just Hep C: The Kaewa Pilot Project – Implementing broader health care to people experiencing homelessness

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Background/Approach: The nurse-led Rodger Wright Community Clinic (RWCC) in Ōtautahi, Christchurch functions alongside the Rodger Wright Centre Needle Exchange. Initially established as a hepatitis C clinic, the RWCC recently recognised the need to expand services to address broader health concerns for people injecting drugs and/or experiencing homelessness. In response, the 12-month Kaewa Pilot Project (KPP) was launched in partnership with Housing First Ōtautahi (HFO), a service for clients/kaewa (meaning to wander, roam) experiencing chronic homelessness.

Analysis/Argument: People who inject drugs and/or are experiencing homelessness frequently encounter significant barriers accessing healthcare, resulting in delayed diagnoses, increased mortality and morbidity rates, and a mistrust of mainstream services. The KPP aimed to provide additional screening and healthcare beyond just hepatitis C testing. For this pilot to be effective, it was essential to engage with the community first, building rapport and trust before launching into health care interventions.

Outcome/Results: Over the course of 12 months, 86 kaewa attended a weekly outreach clinic, with many now consistently engaging around their health. The person-centered approach and collaborating with like-minded services, improved engagement and health outcomes, including new diagnoses, earlier interventions, management of co-existing conditions, and improved linkage to care. Individual health outcomes ranged from a kaewa gaining confidence with their first blood pressure check to someone being diagnosed with diabetes or bowel cancer. Of the 59 kaewa who tested for hepatitis C, 38% were point-of-care antibody positive, and 26% had a detectable viral load. 65% of kaewa reported a history of injecting drug use.

Conclusions/Applications: The KPP highlights the importance of building trust within communities and the effectiveness of offering broader health screenings. Once trust was built, we saw not only an uptake in hepatitis C testing but also an eagerness for further health interventions.

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