

Strengthening referrals to HIV peer support programs in HIV clinical care: A qualitative study

Nathanael Wells, Phillip Keen, Limin Mao, Jane Costello, Benjamin Bavinton, Alexander Dowell-Day, Carla Treloar, Janaki Amin, Rick Varma

Australasian HIV Conference 2025
15-17 September, Tarndanya

nwells@kirby.unsw.edu.au



Referral Pathways Review – Background

- HIV peer support is beneficial to the health and wellbeing of people living with HIV:
 - Improved retention in care, treatment adherence, and viral suppression
- Peer support programs offer first-hand experiences of living with HIV
- Provide a sense of belonging and connection to a wider community of people living with HIV



Referral Pathways Review – Methods

- Data collected between November 2023-August 2024
- Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders:
 - 11 HIV clinicians (sexual health physicians, nurse practitioners, and mental health professionals)
 - 6 HIV peer support workers
 - 3 HIV policy experts

Findings: a need for ongoing referrals

“I’m very keen to get people involved with peer support services if they’re open to that ... “pretty early. I might even bring it up on the day that I’m giving the [diagnosis]. ... But if it wasn’t, it would probably be the next consultation.” ” (Healthcare worker 01, sexual health physician).

Findings: a need for ongoing referrals

“I’m very keen to get people involved with peer support services if they’re open to that ... “pretty early. I might even bring it up on the day that I’m giving the [diagnosis]. ... But if it wasn’t, it would probably be the next consultation.” ” (Healthcare worker 01, sexual health physician).

“No. I feel like if I push it too much they [would] push back. So, I would only raise it if I thought that they mentioned something where I thought it would be directly useful. ... The things they need at the time” (Healthcare worker 01, sexual health physician).

Findings: referrals due to a change in circumstance

*“[If] their social circumstances change, then I would offer [peer support], then I offer it again. But routinely, I visit it once and don’t come back to it, ... because [if] at the beginning they didn’t want it then to my mind, if nothing has changed, then why would they suddenly want it again”
(HCW03, healthcare worker).*

Funded by



Findings: a need for centralised resources

“It would probably be useful to have a cheat, I suppose, of who does what. If it’s housing that I’m concerned about, who’s the best person for that? If it’s a Mandarin speaking social group, who’s the best people for that. So, I think actually having that as a resource would be quite helpful” (Healthcare worker 04, sexual health physician).

Funded by



Conclusion

- Peer support improves quality of life for people living with HIV.
- Referrals should be made at diagnosis *and* form part of ongoing care.
- Encouraging early engagement can mitigate the negative impact of changes to some social circumstances.
- There is a need for easily accessible resources to explain the services offered by HIV peer support organisations.