

FEMALE PEER PROJECT– UNDERSTANDING THE BARRIERS THAT WOMEN FACE IN ACCESSING SERVICES THROUGH THE EYES OF PEOPLE WITH SHARED LIVED EXPERIENCE

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Background:

The Female Peer Project was born out of discussions at INHSU 2023, highlighting the specific needs of women who tend to be excluded from healthcare. In the UK these inequalities can be very stark: women sleeping rough will die, on average, almost 40 years earlier than other women, for example.

Description of model of care/intervention/program:

The seven female paid and volunteer staff at the Hepatitis C Trust's Wessex Peer Programme, with a range of lived and learned experience, designed a community workshop bringing together women with lived experience and other key organisations within their community. The workshop set out to explore the unique challenges that local women face when accessing health and HCV support, and to start designing and implementing work to engage and increase testing among excluded women.

Effectiveness:

Participants identified key barriers for women as fear of social services involvement and judgement from professionals; shame linked to womanhood/motherhood and HCV; domestic abuse and co-dependent relationships; and increased stigma towards women who inject drugs compared to men. To address these, a model was developed encompassing partnerships with existing community services to reach women facing barriers to healthcare, including women experiencing homelessness and women who sex work; the development of a remote women-led telephone support service for women on HCV treatment; and the development of partnerships with two universities to help social work students understand the specific challenges women can face.

Conclusion and next steps:

This project suggests that it is feasible to create a women-specific offer, and that there is a recognized demand for this among partner services working with women in different settings. Lived experience is pivotal to doing this effectively. The women involved have a lot of ideas on local services that can be approached, for finding untested cases in populations of people, and educating staff who work with vulnerable women around Hepatitis C.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The conference collaborators recognise the considerable contribution that industry partners make to professional and research activities. We also recognise the need for transparency of disclosure of potential conflicts of interest by acknowledging these relationships in publications and presentations.