

FROM DIAGNOSIS TO LIVING WELL WITH HIV: THE PIVOTAL ROLE OF PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

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Background: Social networks contribute to improved health and quality of life for people with chronic conditions, yet networks that support the transition of people living with HIV (PLHIV) from diagnosis to living well long-term are not well understood. This research highlights the contribution of peer networks in supporting this transition, and their interplay with clinical and informal support networks of PLHIV.

Methods: Social support network mapping was conducted with 10 recently diagnosed (<5 years) PLHIV in Queensland, to explore their support needs and identify key supports at diagnosis and at time of mapping. Follow-up interviews with 8 peers identified as 'supports' during mapping were conducted, to explore their perceptions of the support role. Thematic analysis identified the strengths of peer networks and challenges peers face supporting recently diagnosed PLHIV.

Results: Peer networks played a crucial social support role from diagnosis to long-term self-management, by providing meaningful support that bridged clinical and everyday worlds. At diagnosis, peers provided information, solidarity and crisis intervention. Peers who were perceived to be living well with HIV and who normalised HIV in everyday contexts, remained long-term supports. Peers who helped PLHIV manage disclosures and stigma facilitated opportunities for social connection and inclusion. By making themselves visible, peers alerted recently diagnosed PLHIV of diverse opportunities to tap into existing peer networks. Peers acknowledged the mutual benefits of support roles, but felt their contributions were under-recognised among broader health services. Many peers worked in casual or voluntary positions, faced financial insecurity and struggled to maintain consistent social support activities for recently diagnosed PLHIV.

Conclusion: With HIV care becoming increasingly individualised and shifting from clinical to everyday worlds, peer networks remain pivotal in supporting recently diagnosed PLHIV to transition towards living well. Diverse formal and informal programs that promote meaningful social engagement among peers must be promoted and funded.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: *This research received funding from the HIV Foundation Queensland and was conducted in collaboration with Queensland Positive People. The presenting author is the recipient of an APA Scholarship and Career Development Scholarship Extension. No pharmaceutical grants were received in the development of this study.*