

Evaluation of Hepatitis C peer support workers project

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Background: Queensland Injectors Health Network (QuIHN) employed peer support workers, one of whom identified as Aboriginal, to support people who inject drugs (PWID) through hepatitis C virus (HCV) testing and treatment. Although QuIHN already provides peer workers to support clients through its own treatment management program, this peer project supported clients who were tested and treated for HCV in a range of other community treatment settings.

Methods: Summary statistical data from the peer support project was analysed for the evaluation. Qualitative data from 22 interviews conducted with peer support workers, their clients, QuIHN project managers, and community health providers, were also analysed to evaluate the utility, acceptability, and impact of the project from a variety of important perspectives.

Results: The peers supported sixty-five clients who undertook HCV testing and treatment following referral from different treatment providers (not all consented to evaluation). An additional 105 HCV point of care tests were conducted by the peer staff. Qualitative data highlighted the many benefits of peer support for people at high-risk of HCV and underlined the significance of the distinct vantage point that peers offer their clients during treatment. The qualitative data also revealed challenges encountered by some peer workers while promoting the service to community treatment providers. Some of the dilemmas that peers encounter when supporting PWID, as well as the inevitable impact of COVID-19 on the project's roll-out also featured in the qualitative findings.

Conclusion: While there are many benefits and positive outcomes associated with peers supporting people receiving treatment for HCV, the role can be challenging for the peers themselves and their organisations. When careful consideration is given to the scope and implementation of peer worker projects, expectations are managed, and peers' individual experiences can be matched to responsibilities that maximise impact.

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