

## **PARTNERING PEER SPECIALISTS WITH NURSES TO EXPAND ACCESS TO HEPATITIS C CARE FOR PEOPLE WHO INJECT DRUGS: THE PATH-EXPANDED EVALUATION**

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### **Background:**

Despite the availability of effective treatment for hepatitis C virus (HCV) in Australia since 2016, approximately 120,000 people remain living with chronic infection. People who inject drugs (PWID) are the main group affected and initiatives are needed to actively engage this population into HCV testing and treatment.

Peer support models are well established as a mechanism to facilitate engagement among marginalised groups and have been found to improve engagement with healthcare and treatment services.

### **Description of model of care/intervention:**

Following an earlier pilot project that identified gaps in linkage to HCV care, The PATH-EXpanded evaluation will assess a "partnership model" between Peer Specialists employed by a peer-led Harm Reduction service and existing Integrated HCV Nurses (IHNs) working in community clinics.

In the model, Peer Specialists partner with an IHN and engage with PWID and individuals thought to be at risk of HCV infection in street and community health settings, providing education, information about HCV testing and treatment, rapid testing in street settings, and facilitate referral to the IHN or other services as appropriate. The project commenced in April 2021 in Melbourne, Australia at three community health services, and will continue until December 2021.

### **Effectiveness:**

The model will be evaluated via a mixed-methods approach. Client engagement data collected by the Peer Specialists will be linked to patient data collected by the IHN, allowing clients to be followed from initial peer engagement through to potential HCV cure. Endline qualitative interviews will explore the acceptability and feasibility of the model. Lessons learned during the development of the project and the initial stages of implementation will also be discussed to guide similar peer-led projects.

### **Conclusion and next steps:**

Elimination of HCV as a global health threat is now a possibility. The innovative partnership model evaluated in PATH-EXpanded has the potential to increase accessibility of HCV testing and treatment among those affected.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

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