

Partnering peer specialists with nurses to expand access to hepatitis c care for people who inject drugs: the path-expanded model evaluation

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Introduction and Aims: People who inject drugs (PWID) are a priority population for Australia's hepatitis C virus (HCV) elimination efforts and initiatives are needed to actively engage this population in HCV testing and treatment.

PATH-Expanded will implement and evaluate two novel "HCV partnership models" pairing Peer Specialists (employed by a peer-led Harm Reduction service) with integrated HCV nurses (IHNs) working in community-based clinics.

Design and Methods: In both models, Peer Specialists will engage with clients of the clinic, provide HCV education and encourage uptake of HCV testing and treatment with facilitated referral to the partnered IHN and other services as appropriate. In model A – a Peer Specialist is **EMBEDDED** as a staff member at a single service. In Model B - a Peer Specialist is linked into multiple services and will **ROVE** between services and with outreach teams.

The project was implemented at three community health services in April 2021 in Melbourne, Australia, and will continue until December 2021.

Results: The model will be evaluated via a mixed-methods approach. Client engagement data collected by the Peer Specialists will be linked to patient health data collected by the IHN, allowing clients to be followed from initial peer engagement through to treatment. Endline qualitative interviews, will explore the acceptability and feasibility of the model. To date, 10 clients have been engaged in the first month and a half of program initiation.

Discussions and Conclusions: Data generated by PATH-EXpanded will provide evidence for peer-led interventions, for which there is currently limited data, and will inform sustainable models of effective HCV care engagement.

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