

Staying Nimble: HIV peer-designed responses in the time of COVID-19

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Background/Purpose:

In April 2020, at the height of national COVID-19 lockdowns, the National Association of People With HIV Australia (NAPWHA) surveyed **147** PLHIV on the impact of social distancing restrictions and related needs for peer support. Participants (**65%**) reported loss of social connection, and many (**41%**) identified a pressing need for mental health support. To address these needs NAPWHA developed a 12-week program of online social forum events.

Approach:

Led by Australian drag identity Vanessa Wagner, 'Chinwag' is an event format with a pedigree dating back to treatments education in the 1990s. Convened every Friday for 12 weeks on Zoom, NAPWHA's 'Chinwag: Positive Connection' forums featured HIV Peer Supporters from member organisations across Australia and a special guest invited to share their expert knowledge and personal perspectives on HIV and Covid-19.

Outcomes/Impact:

Attendance ranged from 18-32 participants. Evaluation showed that the project was successful in building social connection among participants. **60%** of people attended 5+ events, **83%** felt more socially connected as result of participating and **76%** felt it helped their mental health and resilience. Discussions generated important insights about living through a second pandemic, including increased alcohol and substance use; reducing risk during in-person sex work and 'hookups'; and The Institute of Many as a model for social connection during lockdown.

Innovation and Significance:

In a rapidly emerging public health crisis, community organisations and their peak bodies can quickly generate insights and build them into programming without the lead time required by scholarly social research initiatives. Beyond the initial and evaluation survey results, the 'CHINWAG: Positive Connection' events generated knowledge in their own right, demonstrating the ongoing value of health promotion initiatives designed, led and delivered by peers. As Australia responds to Covid-19 this project demonstrates the potential contribution of peer-led programs and community 'infrastructures' in meeting needs and circulating information.

Disclosure of Interest Statement (example):

NAPWHA's CHINWAG: Positive Connection initiative was made possible through funding from ViiV Healthcare.