

New Partnership to boost hepatitis C elimination in regional Aboriginal settings and beyond

Bulgarr Ngaru Medical Aboriginal Corporation, Burnet Institute and the Australasian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine (ASHM) are joining forces to help stop new infections and reduce severe illness due to hepatitis C infection among Aboriginal communities in northern New South Wales.

Aboriginal people represent around eight per cent of Australians living with chronic hepatitis C infection, while comprising only three per cent of the population¹. They are four times more likely not to be included in hepatitis C surveillance data², which means many will miss out on effective treatments if they remain undiagnosed.

There are also barriers that prevent testing, treatment and continuing with hepatitis care, including the need for trained staff who can engage in culturally sensitive ways, as well as the stigma felt by Aboriginal people with hepatitis C, which studies have shown reduces their intention to take up treatment³.

This new partnership led by Bulgarr Ngaru, is exciting because it brings together three components that have been shown to increase access to life-changing hepatitis treatments:

1. the use of novel point-of-care testing alongside a peer incentive program to increase awareness and engagement in hepatitis C care,
2. increased knowledge and skills of the health workforce to identify people at greater risk of hepatitis C infection and link them to care, and
3. improved monitoring of hepatitis C rates in the community through opportunistic testing and treatment during annual health checks.

The project brings together Bulgarr Ngaru's extensive knowledge of Aboriginal communities in northern NSW; Burnet's expertise in implementation research, surveillance, monitoring and evaluation; and ASHM's track record in delivering clinical education in blood borne viruses including viral hepatitis.

For the past 30 years, Bulgarr Ngaru has led healthcare services to Aboriginal communities of northern NSW. They have the proven capability and stability of providing appropriate care and have performed at better than national averages in areas such as chronic disease management.

"We have identified an opportunity to strengthen our services to better support our clients who live with hepatitis C infection in culturally respectful and responsive ways," Scott Monaghan, Bulgarr Ngaru Medical Aboriginal Corporation CEO, said.

"This is a proactive response to the needs of Aboriginal people and will prevent new infections and treat severe disease in our local community."

The partnership project begins in July 2021 with the upskilling of healthcare workers to screen, treat and manage viral hepatitis integrated into HIV/STI testing, using culturally appropriate approaches. ASHM will deliver training co-designed with Bulgarr Ngaru and the EC Australia Partnership led by Burnet.

Troy Combo, Burnet Institute Program Manager, EC Australia, said: "By co-designing with local communities, we can have a better understanding of the issues that stop people from being tested or treated, and involve those communities to develop solutions that work and are acceptable."

The Commonwealth Department of Health has provided funding of \$500,000 over two years directly to Bulgarr Ngaru. This support is part of its national strategy on blood borne viruses and sexually transmissible infections in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Future use of learnings includes scaling up the project and a national rollout.

¹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1753-6405.12402>

² <https://www1.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/ohp-bbvs-1//File/ATSI-Fifth-Nat-Strategy-2018-22.pdf>

³ <https://www.publish.csiro.au/AH/AH19194>