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Better Health for Homeless Men

An award-winning outreach program run by St George Hospital's departments of Renal Medicine, Liver Disease and Mental Health, in conjunction with Mission Australia, is successfully improving the health of the homeless.

Better Health for Homeless Men aims to identify the health needs and improve health care access for homeless men.

Professor Mark Brown, Renal Physician and Medical Director, Division of Medicine, St George Hospital, said homeless men are at high risk of multiple chronic physical and mental health conditions, and are poorly served by standard health services.

"As an outreach service, Better Health for Homeless Men takes screening and health care directly to these men, allowing identification and treatment of risk factors and health conditions, linking hospital and community practice," Professor Brown said.

To reach the targeted community, an outreach clinic was conducted at the Mission Australia Centre (MAC), Surry Hills providing on-site physician assessment and blood collection. This clinic has now expanded to include a needs-based monthly Hepatitis C screening and treatment clinic, including portable fibroscan testing, and a psychiatrist-led mental health clinic. The service has treated 245 homeless men so far.

"Providing access to these health care services improves health outcomes for this at-risk patient group. The physician, clinic, blood collection, liver screening and hepatitis C treatment and mental health care are all now provided on-site.

"We have identified very high rates of mental health disorders (63 per cent), hepatitis C (29 per cent) and cardiovascular risk factors – 30 per cent with an established cardiovascular issue such as high blood pressure or ischemic heart disease, and 42 per cent with obesity and/or abnormal lipid or blood sugar profiles. We offer treatment to all men with identified conditions or risk factors.

"The program continues to develop with the addition of general medical and mental health nurses to ensure good ongoing care for these men between clinics. There are few costs involved as clinician time is given voluntarily or as part of work in a formally established outreach clinic.

"This model is easily transferable and scalable across NSW. The program initially provided care mainly for the men's cardiovascular disease, but has expanded due to identified need to cover the treatment of liver disease and mental health problems," Professor Brown said.

Mission Australia Centre Program Manager, Diana Jazic commended the program.

"Professor Brown really persevered to ensure the men who use our services were able to easily access the health advice and support that they needed such as hepatitis screening, liver assessment, mental health supports and links to St George hospital for pathology and other testing," Ms Jazic said.

“People experiencing homelessness often find it difficult to access health care, and some of the men who live at the MAC may have poor nutrition, have experienced high stress or substance use – all of which take their toll and can prematurely age them.

“Over the past seven years, we’ve seen first-hand how successful this program has been in enabling these men to improve their mental and physical health. With easier access to the tailored health care they need, it means they are empowered to better address their individual concerns. They can make informed decisions about their medical and mental health care within the safe environment of shelter and support at the MAC.

“What has been so amazing about this program is that we have seen how with goodwill, commitment, passion and expertise – incredible results can be achieved.”

Better Health for Homeless Men won the South Eastern Sydney Local Health District Improvement and Innovation Award for Preventive Health in 2017.