

13 June 2018

## **New vaccination clinic next step towards improving health equity for homeless men**

A vaccination clinic based at the Mission Australia Centre in Surry Hills is the latest health care intervention available at 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.

The program, Better Health for Homeless Men, aims to identify the health needs and improve health care access for men experiencing homelessness.

Professor Mark Brown, Renal Physician and Medical Director, Division of Medicine, St George Hospital, said the program initially provided care mainly for cardiovascular disease, but was expanded after learning the needs of the men being treated.

"Men who are homeless are at high risk of multiple chronic physical and mental health conditions and are poorly served by standard health services.

"The addition of a vaccination clinic will benefit not only the men who utilise our service, but the broader community by reducing the spread of preventable diseases.

"As an outreach service, Better Health for Homeless Men takes screening and health care directly to men experiencing homelessness, 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) in Surry Hills, providing on-site physician assessment and blood collection.

Service developments have included a monthly on-site liver screening (including fibroscans), treatment of Hepatitis C and mental health care provided by a psychiatrist. Most recently, a nurse-led clinic was established between physician clinics to ensure efficient ongoing care and to provide influenza and Hepatitis B vaccinations on-site. The service has treated 257 men experiencing homelessness so far.

"We have identified very high rates of mental health disorders (64 per cent), hepatitis C (29 per cent) and cardiovascular risk factors – 38 per cent with an established cardiovascular issue such as high blood pressure or ischemic heart disease, and 44 per cent with obesity and/or abnormal lipid or blood sugar profiles. We offer treatment to all men with identified conditions or risk factors – most of these medical conditions were undiagnosed previously," Professor Brown said.

"This model is easily transferable and scalable across NSW. There are few costs involved as clinician time is given voluntarily or as part of work in a formally established outreach clinic."

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

“The ongoing expansion of the program, driven by Professor Brown and his team, has ensured the men who have used our services have been able to easily access the health advice and support they needed, including links to St George hospital for pathology and other testing,” Ms Jazic said.

“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 as well as trigger illness.

These men are already facing a range of complex challenges and it is unlikely that they could have had such comprehensive medical assessment and care without the development of the service here at the MAC. We know it can be challenging for them to attend separate hospital clinics or even nearby general practices on a regular basis because they are often addressing a range of complex personal concerns.

“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.

The Better Health for Homeless Men Vaccination Clinic will be formally launched during Men’s Health Week 2018, which runs from June 11 to 17.