

Syphilis Health Promotion and Community Engagement

Summary

Health promotion is a critical component of Australia's syphilis response. While effective tools for prevention, testing and treatment exist, these tools can only have an impact if people are aware of them, understand their relevance and know how to access them. Some populations may not be consistently reached through existing health promotion efforts, underscoring the need for tailored, community-led and culturally appropriate engagement strategies. Strengthening investment in health promotion presents an opportunity to improve awareness, expand the reach of prevention and testing messages, and support a more equitable and effective syphilis response.

Reaching priority populations

While community-led, peer-led and other alternative service delivery models have demonstrated promise, several barriers continue to limit broader implementation.

Balancing broad and tailored health promotion

Different communities experience different risks, barriers and needs. While broad health promotion campaigns can play an important role in raising awareness, strategies that are highly effective for one population may have limited relevance for another. Effective engagement therefore requires tailored messaging, appropriate communication channels and meaningful involvement of the communities the messaging is intended to reach.

This may be particularly important for communities that do not traditionally perceive themselves to be affected by syphilis or who have limited engagement with sexual health messaging. As syphilis increasingly affects a broader range of populations, some communities may not perceive the infection as relevant to them and may therefore be less likely to engage with traditional health promotion approaches. A more tailored and community-informed approach may improve awareness, relevance and uptake of prevention and testing services.

The importance of community organisations

Community organisations have played a central role in Australia's HIV response and have developed extensive expertise in health promotion, peer education and community engagement.

Because these organisations are embedded within the communities they serve, they are often able to deliver messages in ways that are trusted, culturally appropriate and responsive to community needs.

Peer education and peer-led approaches can:

- Improve trust and credibility
- Increase engagement with testing and prevention
- Reduce stigma associated with sexual health
- Support culturally safe communication

- Reach people who may not engage with mainstream health services

Community-led organisations are often able to tailor messaging and engagement strategies to the specific needs of different communities. Examples highlighted through the National Syphilis Working Group included community-specific communications channels for gay and bisexual men, trans and gender diverse people, queer women and sex workers; venue-based outreach activities supported by peer educators and volunteers; and the incorporation of syphilis messaging into broader community sexual health campaigns. These approaches recognise that different communities may prefer different communication styles, platforms and messaging approaches, and can help ensure health promotion is relevant, trusted and accessible.

Expanding the reach of health promotion

Hybrid models of health promotion

In an environment of limited resources, digital campaigns are often prioritised because they can reach large audiences at relatively low cost. While this can provide strong value for money, digital campaigns, particularly those that are government-led, are sometimes designed for broad audiences or specific population groups and may have limited capacity to respond to the diverse needs, experiences and communication preferences of different communities.

Digital approaches may struggle to reach some individuals and communities due to factors such as digital literacy, affordability, access to technology, language barriers or personal preferences regarding how they receive information. As a result, more traditional forms of health promotion continue to play an important role. Posters, pamphlets, billboards, venue-based advertising and other physical forms of communication can help reach people who may not engage with digital campaigns and reinforce key messages across a range of settings.

Combining digital communication with peer-led outreach, community engagement and non-digital promotional activities can create a more balanced and effective approach. These approaches allow information to be tailored, contextualised and delivered through trusted relationships, community networks and everyday environments.

Leveraging travel and mobility settings

Travel and migration-related settings present emerging opportunities for syphilis awareness, prevention and testing. These settings may provide opportunities to engage populations that are currently underrepresented in traditional health promotion efforts, including migrants, international students, FIFO workers, highly mobile populations and people travelling to areas with higher rates of STI transmission.

Potential approaches include:

- Inclusion of sexual health information within migration, visa and settlement materials, including multilingual resources and information about how to access testing and healthcare services in Australia.
- Health promotion activities in airports, transit hubs and other travel settings. This could include digital advertising, poster campaigns and simple awareness messaging in high-visibility locations such as bathrooms, waiting areas and baggage collection areas.
- Integration of sexual health messaging into travel-related communication channels and platforms used by mobile workforces and people travelling internationally.

- Future distribution of self-testing technologies through travel and transit settings where appropriate. Existing initiatives such as Thorne Harbour Health's HIV CONNECT vending machines could potentially provide a platform for the future distribution of syphilis self-tests if and when suitable technologies become available.

These approaches have the potential to complement existing health promotion activities by reaching people who may not regularly engage with traditional healthcare services, while also providing opportunities to increase awareness and facilitate earlier testing and diagnosis.

Coordinated health promotion across settings

As syphilis increasingly affects a broader range of populations, there may be value in integrating syphilis awareness and prevention messaging into health promotion activities delivered through a range of sectors and services. Opportunities may exist within alcohol and other drug services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health organisations, migrant health services, women's health services and other community-based settings.

While messaging may need to be adapted for different audiences and delivered through different channels, maintaining consistency and accuracy across health promotion activities is important. More coordinated approaches may help ensure populations are not overlooked, reduce duplication of effort and support delivery of clear, evidence-based information across diverse communities and settings.

Recommendations

1. Fund sustained and coordinated syphilis health promotion

Invest in long-term national health promotion campaigns that combine broad population messaging with tailored approaches for different communities and populations.

2. Invest in community-led engagement

Support community-led organisations to design, deliver and evaluate syphilis health promotion initiatives that reflect the needs and experiences of their communities.

3. Expand tailored outreach approaches

Increase investment in peer-led, community-based and outreach activities that complement digital campaigns and engage populations not consistently reached through traditional health promotion channels.

4. Strengthen cross-sector health promotion approaches

Integrate syphilis prevention and testing messaging into travel and mobility settings, and other sectors to reach populations that may not otherwise engage with existing health promotion efforts.