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It takes a Village to Grow Old and Stay Healthy

Most of us know the old saying 'It takes a village to raise a child' but the reality is that it also takes a village to stay healthy as we grow older.

Numerous studies world-wide have found that social isolation and loneliness are major risk factors for poor mental and physical health outcomes. The risk of premature death associated with social isolation and loneliness has been found to be similar to the risk of premature death associated with well-known risk factors such as obesity, [based on research](#) in Europe, North American, Asia and Australia (Holt-Lunstad et al. 2015).

In 2018, a Relationships Australia Study found that older people, particularly those aged 75 and up, are more likely to experience social isolation and loneliness than any other demographic. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic, social distancing and lock down measures, have had a significant impact. The Australian Institute and Health and Welfare ([Social Isolation and Loneliness Snapshot September 2021](#)) revealed that just over half of Australians surveyed (54%) reported that they felt increased loneliness since the start of the pandemic.

Wentworth Healthcare, the provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, set out to tackle this issue in their region by piloting a [Compassionate Communities approach](#). The Compassionate Community model was first trialled in the Frome Community in Somerset (UK) and recognises the importance of human connection, kindness and compassion to our overall health and wellbeing. Through this approach, the Frome community reduced their unplanned hospital admissions by 30%.

Wentworth Healthcare piloted the approach in the Hawkesbury community, which had been identified as an area of need within the region, with different aspects of the program expanding to other areas. The program focused on improving the social connections of people over 75 years, and over 65 years for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, said, "This innovative approach utilises an asset-based community development approach to focus on sustainable strategies and interventions for people experiencing, or at high risk of, mental and physical health conditions associated with social isolation or loneliness."

"In order to be successful, it was important that this project be co-designed with the community," said Ms Reay.

To identify the areas of need and gaps in services, a Community Development Worker held co-design workshops with over 100 community members and stakeholders. During these sessions, they mapped the available social and support services in the community to develop an online directory and established a steering committee and three working groups to help guide the project.

A free online directory that was developed, www.MyHealthConnector.com.au, and was initially launched in 2019 listing 300 Hawkesbury-based health and community services, wellbeing activities, dementia care supports and social groups, to help older people in the area improve their social connections.



Over the coming years, the directory was expanded to include the rest of the Nepean Blue Mountains region and now lists of nearly 800 services, activities and supports. The directory also went on to list COVID-19 specific supports during the height of the pandemic. To support the sustainability of the directory, organisations and groups can list and update their own services or activities free of charge, with content curated by Wentworth Healthcare staff.

“The directory has continued to grow and has become a valuable resource not only in the community but also for health professionals as a tool for social prescribing,” said Ms Reay.

In addition to the directory, the pilot also introduced Community Connectors, Community Connector Points and Health Connectors to further support older people to make new social connections.

“Community Connectors are volunteers in the local community such as neighbours, hairdressers, taxi drivers, baristas, retail workers – anyone who is willing to help older people they meet in their daily lives,” said Ms Reay.

“We provided free training to over 100 Community Connectors, giving them the knowledge and skills to sign post older people they meet to services, activities or information that could assist them, using the My Health Connector directory as a tool,” she said.

In addition to training locals to be Community Connectors, the project also established Community Connector Points, to support community conversations and assist people with low digital literacy.

“Community Connector Points are council and community organisations such as libraries and neighbourhood centres who can help people who are not so confident with technology to navigate the My Health Connector directory.” Ms Reay.

Staff at Community Connector Points received free training on how to engage in conversations with older people and how to use the directory. Some sites also received resources such as iPads to assist them. Due to their success, Community Connector points were rolled out in other areas with 15 sites now across the Nepean Blue Mountains region.

The co-design workshops identified a gap in social prescribing for patients experiencing social isolation and loneliness when visiting their GP. In addition to rolling-out the directory to healthcare professionals across the region, the project also introduced Health Connectors into general practices.

“Health Connectors are registered nurses trained to work one-on-one with patients and carers on practical and achievable, person-centred social network mapping, planning and goal setting,” said Ms Reay.

“Health Connectors act as a bridge between formal healthcare providers and informal care networks that can help people develop their social support networks,” she said.

By utilising an individual’s current social networks to discuss goal setting, Health Connectors link people to relevant supports for their individual needs. This may include connecting them with a local knitting or walking group, or something more formal like a support group.

Again, due to the success of Health Connectors, the program was rolled out to other areas in the region. To date, almost 350 people have accessed Health Connectors across the region.

Due to the success of the Compassionate Communities approach, Wentworth Healthcare have secured additional funding to further expand parts of the program across the Nepean Blue Mountains.

“As humans, the importance of social connections and the need to belong, has been studied and researched many times, from many different angles. Our very evolution as a species relied upon our ancestors working together as a community. Yet, in this ever-increasingly digitally connected world, some people are finding themselves more isolated than ever before,” said Ms Reay.

“The Australian population is ageing, and I hope we see more funding allocated to preventative programs like one as part of the health system in the future,” said Ms Reay.