

Hepatitis NSW's Specialised Counselling Service: Professional Support for People Undertaking DAA Treatment for Viral Hepatitis C

Author: Pesa L

Background

Hepatitis NSW's specialised counselling service delivers regular hepatitis-informed counselling to individuals who are preparing for HCV treatment, accessing DAA treatment or in post-treatment recovery. The service assists in addressing or preventing the development of long-term emotional and mental health issues. The service is provided by professional counsellors who volunteer their time and expertise.

The counselling service, named *Let's Talk*, was established in July 2013, and has supported 200 hepatitis-affected clients state-wide across NSW via cost-free telephone, Skype or face-to-face counselling sessions. Clients receive weekly appointments and the service is reviewed after 9 sessions.

Methods

The service provides hepatitis-informed person-centred, and solution-focused counselling support to clients affected by hepatitis C. Counsellors provide clients with an informed, non-judgemental environment, helping to gain insights and encourage informed decision making over their health issues.

Our counsellors assist clients with experiences including:

- newly diagnosed;
- have a long history of being affected by hep C;
- whose lives have been impacted by stigma and discrimination;
- who have experienced social isolation due to being a hep C patient; and
- those who have gone through interferon-based treatments without success.

Our counsellor-client collaboration is primarily focused on:

- Emotional support to clients that are newly diagnosed with hep C
- Informed decision-making, and navigating the health care system
- Support in preparing for treatment with DAAs
- Support during their 8-12-24 weeks of treatment
- Encouraging treatment adherence
- Support during post-treatment recovery
- Wellness coaching, self-management, supporting and sustaining healthy life-style choices
- Supporting clients living with advanced liver disease
- Supporting clients preparing for or living with a liver transplant

Results

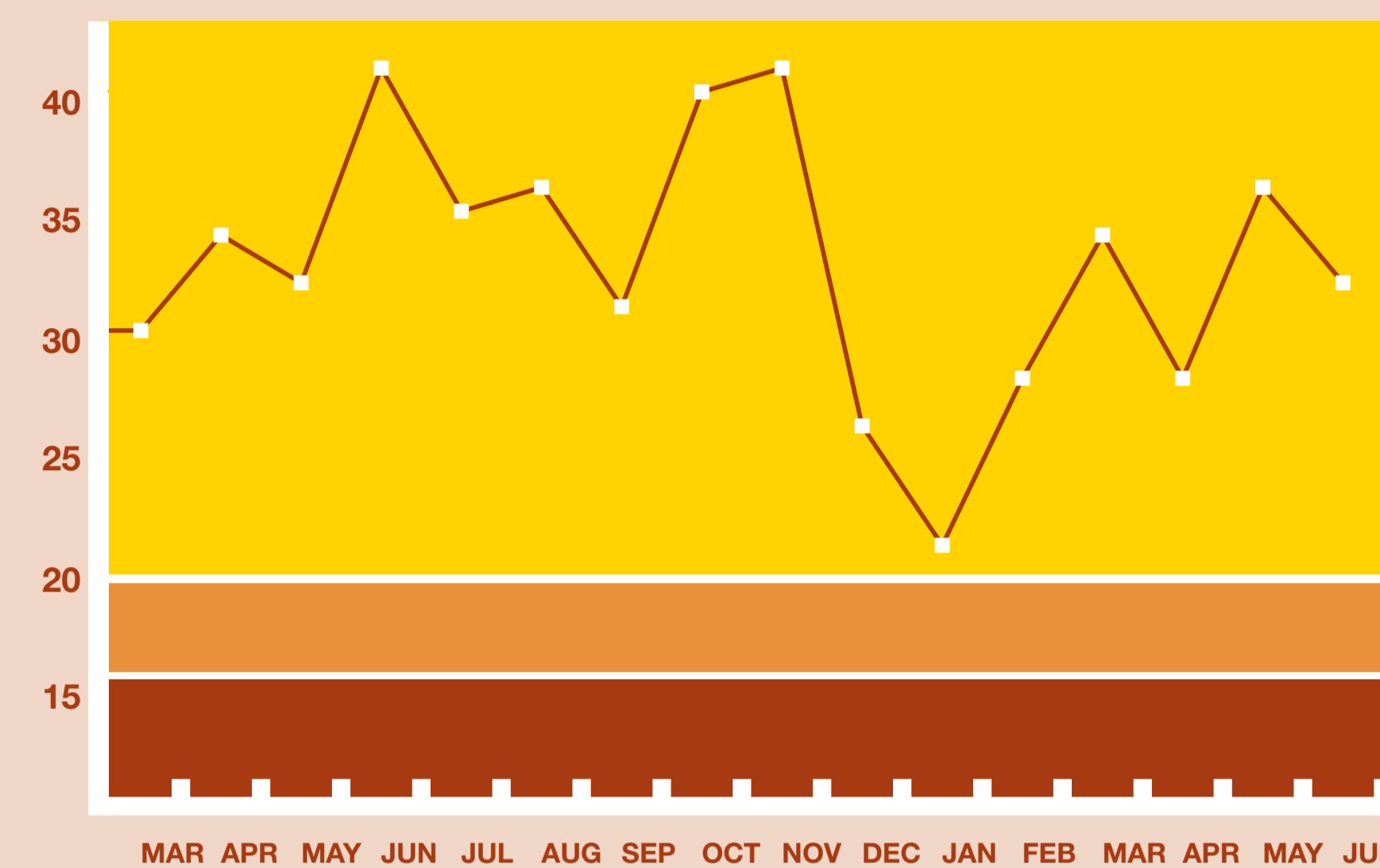
Delivering hepatitis-informed support to affected individuals complements the work of medical professionals such as gastroenterologists, liver specialists, and treatment-prescribing GPs in NSW, particularly for marginalised individuals and residents of regional NSW. Clients identify they are working through issues including concerns around treatment, isolation, stigma and discrimination, and the psychosocial impact of hepatitis C.

Between March 2016 and June 2017 (the new DAA era) the service has delivered 525 sessions, averaging 33 sessions per month.

The results of *Client Satisfaction Surveys* upon ending the counselling relationship, and *Client Follow-Up Surveys* 3

months after the service ends, show a sense of improved well-being as well as positive health outcomes.

Table: Let's Talk Counselling - number of counselling sessions per month: March 2016 – June 2017



100% of counselling clients reported that sessions positively impacted on their sense of wellbeing.

Our Clients say...

"I have done it – after 30 years since my diagnosis, my body is free of hep C virus! Thank you for being my counsellor, my rock, my witness, my ongoing support..."

"Thanks to the support of my counsellor at Hepatitis NSW, I was able to make some smart decisions and felt that I was accepted and understood instead of being judged and blamed. Receiving hep-informed counselling was a very positive and helpful experience..."



Conclusion

Hepatitis NSW's counselling program has been shown to be effective in improving adherence to DAA treatment, supporting clients' overall feeling of improved well-being, informed decision making, and decreased sense of isolation and stigma. The service can be essential to improving health outcomes when it complements hep C treatment.

Since the roll out of new DAA treatments for hepatitis C, the need for hepatitis-informed counselling has remained evident with steady or increasing levels of uptake of the service by hepatitis-affected clients in NSW.

This service could scale-up if more specialists and clinicians offered their patients information about the *Let's Talk* counselling service. Many specialists and GPs recognise that they do not have the time within scheduled appointment to provide in-depth support, however, their patients may be able to achieve better adherence and health outcomes with the additional support of counselling, which can be accessed for free through the Hepatitis NSW Infoline / Counselling Service.