

Women and HIV in Australia 2013

Victorian Minister for Health, the Honourable David Davies, My Journey Kit Launch speech, May 2013

There are many stereotypes regarding HIV. Many people think that it's simply a gay disease. Or that it's a third world disease. Or a disease that affects only injecting drug users.

Everyone here today knows that HIV does not discriminate based on gender, age, sexuality, culture or race – people do.

We are now 30 years into the epidemic and women account for over half of the 34 million people living with HIV worldwide.

Over the past two years, the number of women and girls infected with HIV has increased in every region of the world, with rates rising rapidly in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Latin America.

In sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls make up almost 60% of adults living with HIV.

Internationally transgender women have been identified as being 49 times more likely to contract the virus compared to the general population.

Right now, here in Australia, one in 10 people who are diagnosed with HIV are women.

Between 2007 – 2011 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women comprised 21% of the new HIV diagnosis for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia.

Despite these grim statistics women are not victims and are in fact leading local, regional and international efforts to combat this epidemic.

It is not an understatement to say that women's leadership has transformed the global response to HIV and AIDS.

Positive Women Victoria works to build individual, community and professional capacity through health promotion, support, representation and prevention.

I was moved when I read one of the stories from women on the Positive Women Victoria website.

For those of you who haven't read them – I'd like to share a part of one of those stories:

A 25-year-old a mother of one, wrote to Positive Women Victoria two days after being diagnosed with HIV.

She said that she was scared for herself and for her son – that she didn't know if she'd be around to raise him.

She said that she kept telling herself that HIV wouldn't beat her.

She said that there is so much stigma attached to HIV she feared that her friends, her family and her son would all be incredibly disappointed in her.

People, women, should not experience such anxiety and fear. Clearly we have much more work to do to both challenge stigma and to support women to live well with HIV.

The My Journey kit was developed by women-for-women living with HIV to share their experiences of how this virus impacts on their lives and the lives of people around them.

This kit is the first of its kind in Australia and will become a valuable resource for women to work through what living with HIV really means for them.

Right now in Victoria we have more than 6000 people living with HIV, with around 265 new cases identified each year.

Victorian HIV notifications have stabilised over the past five years, however we need to do more and do things differently if we are to end the HIV burden on individuals, families and communities.

The Victorian Coalition Government is committed to working closely with community based experts, clinicians, affected communities, research institutes and business to break down the barriers around HIV testing, treatment and care.

At the beginning of the year the Government commitment to the establishment of a community-based rapid HIV testing service.

By providing affordable, accessible and convenient rapid HIV testing, we are hoping that people will get tested more frequently.

If someone knows their HIV positive status, they will have the option of starting HIV treatment sooner.

Early access to information, support and treatment is the key – and I can't stress that enough – to managing this disease, as well as preventing it.

But this isn't enough, we also need to ensure people have access to peer support to help them navigating the care system, understanding what a diagnosis can mean, developing resilience strategies and exploring possible treatment options.

And that's why I am pleased to support today's launch and offer my congratulations to all involved in making this project a reality.

The 'My Journey' kit was born from the idea of sharing the experiences of women living with HIV to help alleviate the personal and social impacts.

The kit will provide women with the knowledge, experience and tips to support and encourage others along their journey.

The kit will also help build understanding, awareness and capacity amongst service providers so they are better able to respond effectively to women living with HIV.

I wish every single woman on that journey the best.

Thank you.