# STEP FORWARD: FIGHT STIGMA - MEDIA RELEASE

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## Chronic Health Conditions are Common; Why Is There One We Can’t Accept?

WAAC have recently launched a new health campaign, ‘Step Forward: Fight Stigma’, with the aim of improving health outcomes for people living with HIV.

The Perth-based non-profit organisation is leading the campaign in the hopes of changing the perception regarding HIV to no longer be seen as a life-threatening disease, and instead seen as a chronic health condition – an ongoing condition that requires medical attention.

Stigma and discrimination surrounding HIV have been identified as major barriers when it comes to accessing health services for HIV and STI treatment, which leads to a lower quality of life and potentially more serious complications with the virus.

The campaign consists of bringing together several people each living with their own chronic health condition and having each take a step forward in response to a question about their experiences, including questions such as:

* “my chronic health condition impacts my daily functioning”
* “I am afraid to tell others about my condition”
* “people still believe outdated and wrong information about my condition”, and
* “even when treated, my chronic health condition may be the cause of my death”

Dr Fergus McCabe, local GP, said in an interview for the campaign, ***“The physical health impacts of living with HIV are more hidden than other chronic health conditions. We look out for them, treat them, and it is more of a preventative medicine.***

***We can’t beat stigma in isolation, we need to move our entire society towards accepting people for who they are, not just HIV”***

Rhys Ross, a Peer Educator at WAAC living with HIV, said about his experience living with HIV, ***“For over 40 years now HIV has been synonymous with contagion and death. That’s longer than what I’ve been alive for, that’s a whole generation.***

***I’ve had a few experiences where doctors sort of look at me and are bewildered, and they’ve got no idea what to say to me, or they give me advice that I know is wrong. There are still so many misconceptions around HIV.”***

HIV weakens the immune system, but advancements in prevention and treatment have transformed its management. U=U highlights that maintaining an undetectable viral load through treatment makes HIV untransmittable. PrEP (Pre Exposure Prophylaxis) is a daily pill for at-risk individuals that significantly lowers the risk of HIV transmission. PEP (Post Exposure Prophylaxis), taken within 72 hours of potential exposure, prevents infection. These strategies together form a proactive approach, empowering individuals to control their sexual health and minimise HIV transmission.

WAAC provides a wide range of services and support for testing, treating, and preventing HIV, including counselling and support services, a sexual health testing clinic for gay, bi, trans, gender diverse and non-binary people, and for men who have sex with men, peer mentoring, health promotion and education, harm reduction services, as well as free condoms.

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