

Diversability Award Entrant: Nirvana Health Group



A peer support programme is helping people move from being a patient to taking up paid or volunteer work with a group of Auckland medical clinics.

East Tamaki Healthcare (ETHC) has more than 39 years of experience in large scale delivery of primary care services to the highly diverse communities of the greater Auckland region.

In recent years, it acquired the White Cross network of clinics and invested in the West Auckland and Mt. Roskill areas. Nirvana Health Group was incorporated to serve as the umbrella company for all these business units. The group represents 35 medical clinics with a workforce of more than 1000 medical and support staff, ensuring access to 24-hour private medical care for 180,000 enrolled patients and casual clinic clients on a daily basis.

The group began to test the concept of including peer support as part of the Kia Kaha, Manage Better, Feel Stronger project, which is delivered under the ETHC wellness support (mental health) team.

With guidance from the Counties Manukau DHB "Beyond 20,000 Bed Days" collaborative and using the Improvement Science methods, the Kia Kaha team trialled having peers working alongside clinicians in Otara to see if it would improve the engagement into self-management support, of patients whose poorly managed long-term health conditions were resulting in repeated admissions to emergency departments or hospital.

The rationale for the Kia Kaha programme is that people with long-term medical conditions have a higher risk of also having a common mental health condition such as depression or anxiety. This can reduce their ability to manage their diabetes or other conditions, which

leads to their increased use of hospital services. Evidence exists to show that engaging these people in help to learn self-management and to address their mental health needs, improves outcomes for them and reduces their use of costly health services such as emergency departments and in-patient care.

However another goal of the initiative was to support these people to move from being patients of the service, to being better self-managers, but ultimately to train to lead the self-management courses as volunteer peer leaders.

Three years since the programme started, there are now a large number of former Kia Kaha patients who have trained to work as part of the Kia Kaha team, delivering self-management education to other people with long-term conditions.

Six of these peers are now employed to work with people struggling with long term conditions, and a supporting team of approximately 20 patients of ETHC have trained to be peer leaders of the self-management courses, and work as volunteers to co-lead the Manage Better courses.

ETHC has continued to invest in the peer and clinician "teamlet", with a commitment to implement the model beyond the Otara locality. It is also working to make its team more flexible, offering patients the option of having staff and a peer support worker visiting them in their home.

Initially, Kia Kaha engaged with patients by offering an appointment with a health professional. This achieved an engagement rate of about 50%. When peer support workers were introduced in December 2013, Kia Kaha successfully engaged with almost all patients, and 67 have chosen to continue with peer support.

"As we were able to integrate language and cultural peers, there was a much better engagement rate with communities that were previously hard for us to reach," says community manager Joseph Liava'a.

"For example, when we added a Tongan peer, connection to Tongans became much more successful and similarly when we added a Samoan peer support specialist."

The programme has also helped reduce emergency department visits among Kia Kaha clients, Joseph says.

For peer support worker Merle the programme is about "helping people move forward, without seeming like you know everything."

Merle had been sitting in her room alone reading, in between making sure her mokopuna were all taken care of, and she refused to acknowledge she was depressed. Her journey to peer support specialist began out of the blue when Leona, one of the psychologists on the mental health team, asked what was important to her and she asked for a job.

Leona took her straight from the consult to her first Stanford Self-Management Education training.

Merle initially became a consumer advocate for Kia Kaha: Manage Better, Feel Stronger in 2013. In 2014 she participated in a trial of the impact of peer support on engagement with

high needs/high health users in Kia Kaha. Later that year she was employed as a peer support, self-management leader and expert patient in the Kia Kaha project and still works in this capacity.

Since Merle is conversant in Te Reo, she leads the Kaupapa Manage Better Courses for ETHC Maori patients who are interested in attending.

Tasi has a similar story. Several years ago after resigning from his job as a statistician for Statistics NZ, he fell into a minor depression and his GP referred him to the in-house psychiatrist. When he was asked if he wanted to join a self-management education programme, he asked why there was no option of doing it in his mother tongue, which is Tongan.

He then trained to be a leader of the SME programme (English) in 2014, before volunteering as a leader in the newly translated Tongan version of the SME course in 2015. Later that year he was employed to lead the recently translated Tongan version of the Manage Better course at his own clinic in Otara Mall, which has a high concentration of Tongan patients as well as a Tongan GP and nursing staff. He has now led 10 Manage Better courses in Tongan, trained in health coaching, and has translated several key handouts from that programme into Tongan.