

MEDIA RELEASE

For Immediate Publication

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WA AIDS COUNCIL ON FAKE HIV EMAIL

While the by-election in the seat of Wentworth has little immediate impact on the lives of many Australians, the recent malicious fake email against Kerry Phelps does impact the lives of people who are living with HIV.

No one would have the temerity to suggest a person who has diabetes, asthma or any other chronic disease, is not able to hold a public position, yet the implication in this fake email is that a person with HIV cannot hold public office. We need to call out the ignorance and the stigma lying behind this offensive email.

HIV is a chronic manageable illness that allows people to live productive, successful and useful lives, including public office should they so choose. Not only is HIV manageable; with current medications, a person's viral load (the amount of HIV virus within their body) can be undetectable. Where the viral load is undetectable for a period of six months, the individual is unable to transmit the HIV virus to anyone else.

Another implication behind the email is that HIV only affects certain groups within the community, mainly LGBTIQ+. But in fact, many heterosexual men acquire HIV when travelling in other areas of the world where there is a high prevalence of HIV amongst men and women. Some heterosexual men may not be aware they have acquired HIV unless they test for it. David Kernohan, CEO of the WA AIDS Council, stated that he would encourage heterosexual men to test for HIV when they have been to high prevalence areas and engaged in sexual or drug taking behaviours that may have placed them at risk. The sooner a person is diagnosed, the more likely it is that the viral load can be brought down to undetectable levels.

Many people living with HIV struggle with the stigma and discrimination that comes from people's lack of understanding and knowledge, as typified in this false email. Yet, despite the stigma that still exists, many people are not only living productive and useful lives, they are living with dignity, compassion and respect for other people.

The WA AIDS Council wishes Kerryn Phelps and the other candidates well for the election on Saturday, but most importantly, we look forward to a society and community where such emails would not be sent, because people understood that HIV is chronic illness that can affect all people - men, women, children, heterosexual, homosexual, transsexual - and that people would respond to each other with respect and compassion, rather than stigma and rejection.

ENDS

For media comment, please contact:

David Kernohan
Chief Executive Officer
Western Australian AIDS Council
Ph | (08) 9482 0000 Email | dkernohan@wa aids.com

