

Haircuts. Conversation. And an innovative approach to help end HIV.

Between 2016 and 2018, the HIV notification rates for Aboriginal and Torres Islander* men from North Queensland, Australia trended at almost 3 times the rate of non-Indigenous notifications.¹ Dr. Darren Russell and his team from the local Cairns Sexual Health Service clinic knew that something had to be done.

With grant support† from Gilead, they were able to overcome sexual health stigma and increase HIV education and testing in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities through an innovative program that brought the HIV conversation to a place where many younger Indigenous adults already felt at home — their community barbershop.

*Indigenous Australians include people identifying as Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and persons who are of both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin.

†Cairns Sexual Health Service is a recipient of grant funding from Gilead Sciences Pty Ltd.

1E. Power, P. Manassero. Indigenous Health and Managing HIV Complex Care in a Pandemic in for North Queensland. Figure 3, Page 4. May 2022.



A challenge of systemic mistrust.

The rising rate of HIV notifications in North Queensland needed to be addressed quickly. But for a community with a long and understandable history of mistrusting the establishment, that was easier said than done. Issues such as stigma, lack of awareness, and lack of understanding meant that even discussing HIV in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities would be extremely challenging.

Dr. Russell and Cairns Sexual Health Service knew that connecting with the Indigenous communities would be an important, insightful step towards limiting the spread of HIV.

“If we just sit back and wait for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community to arrive, they won’t come. So to educate them about HIV prevention and help them get tested, we have to go out to the community.”

- Dr. Darren Russell
Program Director | Cairns Sexual Health Service



Making a fresh start.

Dr. Russell and his team at Cairns Sexual Health Service recognized that local barbershops could provide a more casual way to bring up the topic of HIV and STI prevention with younger Indigenous adult men. By bringing the conversation to the community rather than waiting for them to come to the clinic, they'd be taking a proactive approach to closing the gaps in HIV awareness.

“We want to get their younger peers within the community talking about HIV and sexual health. Somebody besides us older workers at the health clinic. And naturally, the barbers can get conversations going, because they listen to and tell so many stories.”

- Morgan Dempsey
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Worker Coordinator
Cairns Sexual Health Service



Cairns Sexual Health Service reached out to Rob Hodge, founder of The Fresh Start Academy. His program was training young barbers in the community and equipping them with the tools and information to be able to have difficult but crucial health conversations with the men and women who come in to get their hair cut.

When he was contacted by the Cairns Sexual Health Service team about their barbershop program idea, Rob recognized how his Fresh Start Academy could be the perfect vessel to help get their HIV awareness message out. By teaching the barbers how to start conversations with their clients about HIV, they could help to demystify the epidemic, promote de-stigmatization, and even provide referrals to health clinics or on-site screenings in exchange for free haircuts — which could go a long way to help close the gaps in HIV awareness in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

“If we can create an environment or place where the community can come in and feel comfortable about having a conversation, being educated and getting tested as well, it goes a long way to making sure we can keep those numbers down.”

- Rob Hodge
Founder | Fresh Start Academy



Getting the idea off the ground.

The intent was to build the barbershop program through an iterative process, formed over time by cultural protocols, and led by members of the community themselves. It was a great idea, but Cairns Sexual Health Service needed financial assistance to help get the project off the ground.

Fortunately, Cairns Sexual Health Service filed a request for financial support and Gilead Sciences Pty Ltd. provided an unrestricted grant to make their barbershop HIV outreach program a reality. Now, they were ready to move forward with the program.



Barbers wanted. Everywhere.

With the barbershop program underway, Rob Hodge brought in fellow barber Josh Anderson — owner of the Cartel Collective barbershop — as a lead educator to establish the program's curriculum centered around teaching the tools of the trade, and how to start a conversation with clients about their health.

With training and support from Cairns Sexual Health Service's own Indigenous health workers, Rob's barbers were able to strip away the stigma of discussing HIV by incorporating the topic of sexual wellbeing into a safe, ritual community space.

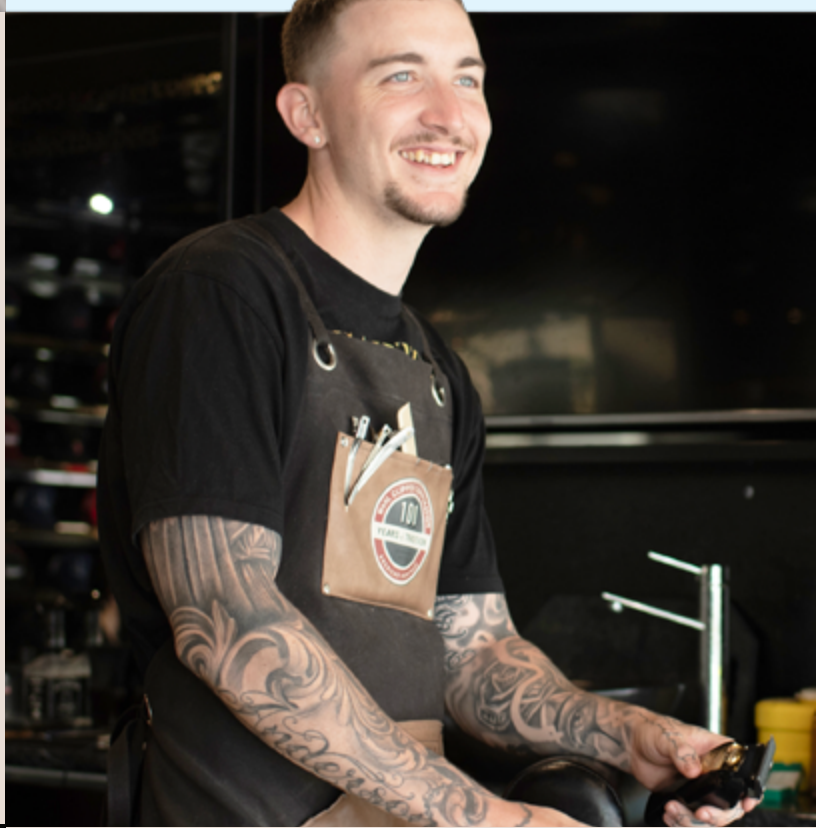
“...to be able to have the HIV conversations with the community— centered around prevention and management — coming from an informed place....It blew me away, how fast kids at that age could learn.”

- Josh Anderson
Owner | Lead Educator, Fresh Start Academy



Their program offered community members a VIP card — good for 3 months of free barber services — if they agree to a sexual health check and to get tested for HIV. With 3 months being intentionally chosen as a crucial HIV re-testing milestone, they could renew their VIP card by agreeing to take another test.

With the Fresh Start Academy's barbers hard at work, the team at Cairns Sexual Health Service was finally making an impact with encouraging young adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men to get tested for HIV. Not to mention the undeniable enthusiasm from the barbers themselves and their communities.



Finding the connection to care, in each community.

The success of the barbershop program shows that working together with communities disproportionately impacted by HIV is a crucial step to helping end the epidemic. Health clinics like Dr. Russell's have the knowledge in treatment and prevention and the missing piece is often the ability to connect with the community to create transformative and meaningful change. It's the collective of us all working together that will enable future programs like this to be successful.

“We reached out to Gilead because we know they have a commitment to community and helping improve lives. So it's that collection of all of us working together that enables the project to be successful.”

- Dr. Darren Russell



Together, we can help end the epidemic for everyone, everywhere.