

CONNECTing at risk communities with rapid HIV testing

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wednesday 23 March 2022 - SAMESH, a partnership between SHINE SA and Thorne Harbour Health, has launched CONNECT – a pilot program evaluating the use of vending machines to dispense free Atomo HIV Self-Test (HST) kits to support rapid HIV testing and to strengthen pathways to treatment and support.

With five initial locations around Adelaide, CONNECT is the first federally-funded project of its kind in Australia, building on similar projects implemented in the USA, the UK, and New Zealand.

To access a free HIV self-test kit, users scan a QR code located on promotional materials and/or the vending machines themselves. This will take them to a webpage where they will be asked to provide basic information about age, place of birth, sexuality, and testing history. Once the basic information is completed, they can then access a kit by scanning the QR code on the vending machine of their choice.

The target groups for the CONNECT pilot project include gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM) including non-English speaking backgrounds, such as international students. CONNECT's five vending machines are located at university campuses and community venues around Adelaide.

These priority groups currently experience multiple barriers to HIV testing, including: cost, time, privacy, stigma, and discrimination. CONNECT provides easy access to free HIV self-tests via vending machines placed in discrete and safe locations with an aim to directly address these barriers.

"As we draw closer and closer to ending new HIV transmissions in Australia, we need innovative initiatives like CONNECT to reach those populations that have been long considered 'hard-to-reach,'" said Thorne Harbour Health CEO Simon Ruth.

"Within hours of setting the first few machines up, we've already seen people accessing the free HIV testing kits – allowing them to know their HIV status and take charge of their ongoing sexual health and wellbeing."

CONNECT is focused on making HIV testing more accessible in Adelaide; encouraging ongoing sexual health testing; and providing access to a culturally-safe treatment pathways that include further testing, treatment, and support from community programs and peer support groups if necessary.

As part of the project's culturally safe access and engagement model the CONNECT webpage content, campaign materials, and follow-up survey have been translated and are available in English, Arabic, Hindi, Indonesian, Malay, Mandarin, Spanish, and Vietnamese.

The pilot period for the CONNECT project will be through September 2022.

ENDS

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