A n inspiring nurse-led project delivered new hepatitis C treatment to marginalised communities and achieved micro-elimination of the virus locally two years ahead of a national target.

‘We just decided that everyone who needed this treatment should have it,’ says addiction nurse practitioner Eugenia Moyo-Hlahla, who works at Central and North West London NHS Foundation Trust. ‘We weren’t going to give up on anyone.’

Improved treatment regimen

It was this determined approach that saw the nurse-led team win Team of the Year at the RCN Nursing Awards 2023.

Ms Moyo-Hlahla recalls the ambitious goal that drove the team to achieve its target-busting success in testing and treatment for hepatitis C at the Addiction Recovery Community (ARC) Hounslow. As a long-time addiction recovery nurse, Ms Moyo-Hlahla was aware of the high incidence of hepatitis C among drug users, who may engage in unsafe practices such as sharing needles. Although many people with hepatitis C don’t experience symptoms, the virus causes damage to the liver in the long term. Early detection and treatment with anti-virals can prevent serious liver damage.

‘Previously, we were treating it with interferon injections – which were effective but had lots of side effects,’ she says. ‘Many of our patients were reluctant to have the treatment because of the side effects they experienced.’

In 2016, the World Health Organization launched a global effort, sparked by advances in technology and research that had seen the development of effective anti-virals for hepatitis C. NHS England picked up the baton and committed to eliminating the disease by 2025.

Bid to eliminate hepatitis C

Micro-elimination can be achieved in a local area by ensuring:

» 100% of people using the
service have been offered a hepatitis C test.
» 90% of service users have been tested.
» 75% of those who were diagnosed with hepatitis C have started treatment.

‘The new treatment involves taking one tablet a day for three months, and patients experience far fewer side effects, so it was a game changer,’ says Ms Moyo-Hlahla. With support from NHS England, the team began offering testing and effective treatment to everyone.

With 22 years’ experience as a nurse, Ms Moyo-Hlahla knew that effective teamwork would be crucial for the project to be successful. ‘My time was ring-fenced – I knew that on my own I wouldn’t be able to achieve much,’ she says. ‘But once colleagues understood and saw the importance of the project, they embraced it. Once the team got behind it, we were really able to make a difference.’

**Successful outreach**
The team was determined to reach the people who needed the testing and treatment and understood the scale of the challenge. People living with addiction, struggling with mental health issues and often leading disorganised lives are among the hardest to reach groups.

‘We knew that we needed outreach – we had to go to the patients,’ says Ms Moyo-Hlahla. Reaching patients in the community was made possible via effective collaboration with numerous partners, who she says carried out their roles with ‘great enthusiasm and dedication’.

‘For example, we walked through parks with park rangers and approached people to offer testing and treatment. We made it clear that we weren’t condemning or judging – we were there to support and help.’

**Persistence pays off**
We called people every day to remind them to take their tablet. If they appeared to disengage, then we would visit them. We would try to engage them and bring them back. We didn’t give up on people. Our goal was to reach everyone.

‘As the project gained momentum, we received lots of positive feedback, which also helped to spur us on.’

Tips on establishing an effective team

Project lead Eugenia Moyo-Hlahla’s strategies for a successful winning team:
» Communicate a clear vision It took time to get everyone on board, but once they understood, they bought into it
» Make everyone feel valued Each team member brought their own skills to this effort
» Identify and solve issues Reducing paperwork helped the team
» Celebrate successes We had team lunches and brought people together to mark achievements, even when we reached smaller milestones
» Give regular feedback Monthly updates on how we were doing towards our targets helped keep everyone involved