

Media Release
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Care for HIV-positive pregnant women honoured

A program that has helped 25 HIV-positive women deliver healthy babies, with zero transmission of the disease, is a finalist in the HESTA Australian Nursing Awards.

HIV clinician and midwife, Karen Blyth, has led the development of care for expectant mothers who are HIV positive. The innovative nursing model brings together the resources of The Alfred, The Royal Women's Hospital, Monash Medical Centre and the Royal Children's Hospital.

"Our message is a message of hope," said Ms Blyth, a Clinical Nurse Consultant.

"The outlook for HIV used to be acute illness and a dismal outcome. But with better treatments in the last 10-15 years we have seen a big shift in thinking. In Australia, HIV is now a manageable chronic disease. HIV-positive people can live a normal life with the right support and having babies can be part of that life."

Ms Blyth said 27 women were involved in the program and 29 babies – including two sets of twins – had been born so far without a single case of viral transmission. The background transmission rate worldwide from mother to baby is around 40 per cent, with breastfeeding a risk factor. Care of these women needs to be multi-disciplinary, with all of the healthcare providers working cohesively to get the best possible outcomes for this vulnerable group.

"Women are still largely overlooked in the Australian HIV epidemic. HIV positive pregnant women were falling through the gaps in service provision. We knew we could improve their journey and reduce the risk of their infants contracting HIV," Ms Blyth said.

"We are thrilled to have a zero transmission rate in the program. That's what makes it all worthwhile – seeing these families deliver healthy babies."

Although Victoria has a high rate of HIV-positive women choosing to have children, many of the pregnancies were unplanned and some women did not know they were HIV-positive until after they fell pregnant.

"It's very hard for women feeling euphoria about being pregnant to then find out they are HIV positive. Explaining that breastfeeding is not the best thing for their babies is another loss. Many of these women come from non-English speaking backgrounds, so there are often complex cultural issues to manage."

The new care model includes a one-stop-shop for HIV and obstetric services; continuity of care during pregnancy, delivery and post-natal, as well as anti-retroviral treatment for babies.

Ms Blyth is one of four finalists in the Innovation in Nursing category of the HESTA Australian Nursing Awards.

The Innovation in Nursing winner will receive a \$10,000 grant to develop their service or program. Other awards are: Nurse of the Year with \$10,000 in education and travel grants, and Graduate Nurse of the Year who will benefit from \$5,000 in education and travel grants. The prize money is provided by ME Bank, a supporter of the awards since 2008.

The winners will be announced at a gala awards ceremony in Melbourne on Florence Nightingale's birthday – 12 May. Interstate finalists will be flown to Melbourne for the event at Crown Entertainment Complex.

HESTA is one of Australia's largest superannuation funds with more than 700,000 members. It is chosen by more people working in health and community services than any other fund.

Visit hestanursingawards.com to book tickets for the event or learn more about the awards.

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