

Loneliness Awareness Week: Wentworth Healthcare shines a light on local connector programs tackling loneliness

This Loneliness Awareness Week – 4 to 10 August 2025, Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network (NBMPHN), is shining a light on the health impacts of loneliness and social isolation, and the local support services available across the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith areas.

Research has shown that isolation and loneliness can shorten life expectancy by up to 15 years and can increase the risk of hospitalisation or early entry into nursing homes. The 2025 World Health Organisation report 'From Loneliness to Social Connection' highlights some of the key health impacts loneliness and isolation can have, including premature death, poor physical and mental health, greater psychological distress and general disconnection.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, said that the issue of loneliness and its effects on people's health has been a priority in the local area for many years.

"In 2018, we commenced an initiative in the Upper Blue Mountains focused on a compassionate community approach. Building on this work, in 2019, we were selected as one of two Primary Health Networks nationally to develop and trial a Social Connectedness program," she said.

The program focused on reducing isolation and loneliness in older people, which recognises the importance of human connection, kindness and compassion to our overall health and wellbeing.

"It was so successful that we developed additional programs based off the same approach. These include community members who have been trained to be community connectors, organisations that are Community Connector Points, Health Connectors in general practice and Wellbeing Connectors. In 2023, we implemented Intergenerational programs, and most recently, a Pharmacy Connector in the Hawkesbury and Pharmacy Connector Points across the region," she said.

"Our newest initiative with local pharmacies, trains pharmacy staff to recognise and assist vulnerable people experiencing loneliness and to socially prescribe activities, services or programs that may help them to build their connections and support networks," she said.

Pharmacies can use the www.MyHealthConnector.com.au directory, which is a tool developed by NBMPHN to support connectors and people across the region to know about and access services and programs available. This website also supports social prescribing for primary care.

"While the Pharmacy Connector program is new, we are already hearing incredible stories of community members who were previously experiencing loneliness being linked with local activities through their pharmacist. One lady now attends weekly morning tea catch ups through her local community centre where she has now made some friends, and that is something she can look forward to every week," said Ms Reay.

"This approach has also supported individuals who have experienced natural disasters. Research shows that socially connected individuals fare better during natural disasters, with stronger mental and physical wellbeing. Our region has been significantly affected by multiple natural disasters which really highlighted the importance of connecting communities to build resilience," said Ms Reay.

Ms Reay added that while the issue of loneliness and its effects on people's health is an issue that is widely known and gaining traction overseas, it could do with more attention in Australia, particularly regarding how it is recognised and treated in primary care.

“Social prescribing, where general practitioners (GPs) and practice nurses refer patients to community-based activities, has proven effective in improving overall wellbeing and reducing GP and hospital emergency department visits by about 20 per cent,” Ms Reay explained.

“Introducing dedicated Medicare Benefit Scheme (MBS) item numbers for social prescribing would encourage widespread adoption and allow GPs more time to address social isolation and loneliness which can sometimes be the root causes of poor health. Supporting initiatives like this, which help to prevent the onset of a range of chronic mental and physical health conditions, is a great example of how we can shift the healthcare system from one that focuses on treatment to one that prioritises prevention,” she concluded.

To learn more about social connection programs and how to access them, visit nbmphn.com.au/SocialConnections

