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As ACON marks 25 years of service to the LGBT community and people affected by HIV/AIDS, we look at how the organisation has helped build the health and wellbeing of lesbians in NSW over the last quarter of a century.

When HIV/AIDS began its rampage across Australia in the mid 1980s, it changed many things in our community, including the status of lesbian health.

“It’s a little known fact but four of the people who were initially diagnosed with HIV in NSW were lesbians,” says Suin ni Chrochuir who was ACON’s Women & AIDS Project officer in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

To help prevent HIV transmission among lesbians, the recently established AIDS Council of NSW produced and distributed ‘sapph sex’ resources including dental dams and HIV info packs.

But the low rate of HIV transmission among lesbians (a phenomenon which continues today) meant that ACON’s lesbian health programs remained limited to very basic HIV prevention as well as a support group for lesbians with HIV.

However, throughout the 1990s there was a growing recognition that effective HIV prevention involved taking a more holistic approach to health and wellbeing.

This meant addressing general health issues among gay men and lesbians such as sexual health, alcohol and drug use, mental health, street safety, domestic violence and housing.

This approach was formalised in 2000 when ACON officially expanded its focus beyond HIV/AIDS to include key aspects of LGBT health and wellbeing.

ACON’s delivery of lesbian health programs developed quickly and by the mid-2000s, ACON was offering a broad range of support groups and education services in key centres across NSW.

In 2008, ACON's commitment to lesbian health took a giant leap forward with the launch and implementation of Turning Point, a comprehensive plan for addressing the distinct health needs of NSW's lesbian community.

"We're now focused on integrating lesbian health priorities into all of ACON's relevant programs, services and activities," says ACON CEO Nicolas Parkhill.

"For example, women now make up 20% of our counselling clients, hundreds of women regularly attend our various groups and workshops, and lesbian health needs are integrated into our alcohol and drug programs, our mental health services, our anti-violence programs and our work around LGBT ageing.

"Our efforts are also focused on helping the mainstream healthcare system acknowledge, understand and address the unique health and wellbeing issues that affect lesbians.

"However, we get very little government funding for our lesbian health work and so rely heavily on fundraising and donations to deliver our lesbian health programs.

"By making a donation through our 25for5 fundraising program, community members can join us on the journey and help us continue to improve the health and wellbeing of lesbians and same sex attracted women throughout NSW."