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MEDIA RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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ACT Health ‘clumsy, alarmist’ in sex worker case

The ACT government’s handling of a case involving an alleged HIV-positive sex worker has been clumsy, alarmist and has failed to follow basic public health guidelines, the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS (NAPWA) has said.

The Association today criticised the ACT health department for an apparent breakdown of fundamental risk management guidelines, accusing it of creating unnecessary community concern over the case.

“We are really concerned about the way this has been handled,” said NAPWA Executive Director Jo Watson. “The appropriate public health approach has not been followed in the case of Mr Hector Scott; instead he’s been subjected to trial by media.”

“In the normal course of events, when a person is suspected of putting others at risk of HIV infection, health authorities use counselling, education and, in more serious cases, public health orders to ensure that people are not put at risk. The criminal justice system should be used only as a last resort. In this case, it appears ACT Health has panicked and bypassed the significant public health interventions at its disposal, choosing instead to refer this case to the police. This is not helpful – it undermines the well-established and highly successful approach which has been a hallmark of Australia’s success in combating HIV, it perpetuates stigma against people with HIV, and it discourages people at risk of HIV from testing and treatment.”

NAPWA also slammed the decision by the ACT chief health officer to release personal details about the accused to the media. “For a government agency to release personal and confidential information in this way has been a great shock and affront to many of us. There is no faith in a system that can so publicly and dramatically expose a person’s identity and medical details, characterise their contacts in such a suggestive manner, and then leave that person with nowhere to go before a next court appearance. It is dangerous to the individual, dangerous to those who are by implication connected to his alleged activities, and dangerous for anyone living with HIV to see human rights and personal dignities trampled over in this way.”

NAPWA is appealing to the media to avoid sensationalism in reporting the case, pointing out that no evidence has yet been presented which suggests that Mr Scott has infected anyone with HIV, or even placed anyone at risk of contracting HIV.

“No one has come forward saying they have been infected, no evidence has been shown that this person was posing a risk to anyone in any manner, and yet we now have a situation where many people living with HIV in Australia are again feeling demonised and under attack by hysteria and scare mongering playing out in the general community, created by a clumsy public health intervention.”

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