Evolving how we talk about diabetes

Two decades of learning, listening and lived experience shaping how Diabetes Victoria communicates today.

Diabetes Victoria Marketing Communications and Development : Joanne Walsh, Alex Johnson, Sandra Scalzo, Ruby O'Brien, Brittany Denton.

Background

Over the past two decades, Diabetes Victoria's marketing has seen a profound shift from fear-based to solutions-based messaging. In the early 2000s, diabetes health campaigns often used scare tactics that emphasised related health complications to shock community into action. Research from the Australian Centre for Behavioural Research in Diabetes (ACBRD) has shown that these approaches proved less effective, discouraged people from engaging in preventative care and routine health checks, and resulted in social stigma proving harmful.

Today, Diabetes Victoria uses solution-based messaging designed to inform, empower and encourage action. People living with diabetes are treated as partners in the health journey.

Why Change Matters

Replacing scare tactics with solutions-based messaging is critical to public health. By replacing fear with support, we are recognising the psychological barrier fear can cause, which can lead to people avoiding important appointments in order to escape the feeling of being judged or blamed.

When people feel empowered, they are more likely to stay engaged with their care, attend their annual care cycle appointments, and connect with peers. This present approach removes emotional barriers to management, leading to better long-term health outcomes and a more connected, supported community.

Aim

To transform diabetes advocacy through campaigns by replacing fear-based 'scare tactic' messaging with co-designed campaigns, seeking evidence from external sources. By combining behavioral science and lived experience, we aim to break down stigma barriers that prevent people living with diabetes from accessing care and support.

Scan for more detail

Methods

Diabetes Victoria has deliberately shifted from risk-focused and fear-based messaging toward campaigns that centre strength, lived experience and shared understanding. This shift is reflected across more recent campaigns, including 2020 where COVID-19 was dominating. We heard from our community about their positive experiences with their front line health workers and how nurses made the difference in access to care, encouraging others to engage with their team, even during challenging times.

Lived experience and advocating for access to diabetes technology were the only ways forward which is highlighted in 2021 when our community reached out to share their stories of living with diabetes and speak to their peers through our reach.

Campaigns are now shaped through continuous improvement measures including:

- Co-design workshops informing tone, language and imagery, aligned with 'Our Language Matters' position statement
- Review by a diverse Community Advisory Committee
- Input from the Lived Experience Employee Engagement Group
- Leadership review involving clinical experts and behavioural scientists
- Continuous feedback loop through improvement systems and monitoring.

Consumer Advisory Committee (CAC)	Established in 2017, this group of passionate volunteers with lived experience help to guide Diabetes Victoria's work.
ACBRD Partnership	Established in 2010, the ACBRD reviews ongoing communications, advises and reports on community feedback
Lived Experience Employee Group	Established in 2023, the LEEEG are staff of Diabetes Victoria consulted on internal and external communication
Continuous Improvement Portal (CIP)	The CIP is used internally, reporting on both internal and external feedback to guide continual improvement.

Observed Outcomes

Over time, outcomes have included:

- Reduced use of fear-based language and imagery
- Greater visibility of lived experience and authentic storytelling
- Greater engagement from community
- Improved Donor Survey results from 2022 to 2024
- Stigma reduction embedded as a priority within the Diabetes Victoria 2024–2030 Strategy

Timeline

2005
'Diabetes: It's time you opened your eyes to the risk'

2008
Type 2 Diabetes Often Runs In Families

2010
'Prevent type 2 diabetes and AVOID kidney damage'

2013
'The Face of Diabetes'

2015
'280 a day'

2018
Bust a Myth

2020
Nurses make the difference

2021
NDW | Lived experience

2022
World Diabetes Day 2022 – Access to diabetes care

2023
Global Pledge to End Diabetes Stigma launch - Melbourne

2024
Shining the spotlight on access to technology

2025
Check today or a healthier tomorrow

diabetes vic