

THE 2024
WEPs AWARDS

YOUTH
LEADERSHIP

Winner



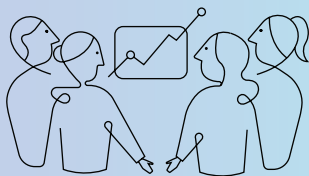
Nat Young and Amber Jones,
Co-founders of PEERS

PEERS

About the Company

Name: PEERS
Country: New Zealand
Employees: 1-10 employees
Percentage of women employees:
Between 30% – 50%

Website:
<https://peershealth.co.nz/>



PEERS is a social enterprise dedicated to supporting the LGBTQI+ community in accessing safe and equitable healthcare in New Zealand. Its innovative health-care platform allows users to find and book accredited, empathetic practitioners.

Two aspiring leaders promoting health equity

In New Zealand, health-care practitioners often lack access to LGBTQI+-focused education, with training typically limited to optional external courses that are neither tailored to health-care professionals nor to the specific needs of the LGBTQI+ community.

Surveys and in-depth interviews¹ conducted by PEERS' co-founders revealed troubling statistics: 40 per cent of LGBTQI+ individuals avoid seeking healthcare due to fear of violence or hostility, and 21 per cent report experiencing discrimination from practitioners.

To address these disparities, Nat Young and Amber Jones co-founded a digital healthcare platform that connects the LGBTQI+ community with accredited and empathetic practitioners. Both Nat, an AFAB (assigned female at birth) nonbinary person, and Amber, a queer woman, faced negative experiences within the healthcare system. As a nurse, Nat also witnessed first-hand the lack of training most practitioners receive on queer-specific health issues, topics that are generally omitted from standard curricula or relegated to optional

courses in medical, nursing and on allied health courses. These experiences fuelled their commitment to creating a safer, more inclusive system for all, beginning with the LGBTQI+ community.

¹ Data is based on 20 in-person interviews with healthcare users, and leaders in the LGBTQI+ community, and approximately 100 survey responses from across the country, conducted over a period of six months.



A digital solution for inclusive healthcare

The PEERS platform currently operates in Ponsonby, an inner-city suburb of Auckland, and enables users to find and book accredited, empathetic practitioners. The website lists 101 practitioners across 16 fields. It also allows users to add new practitioners to the database and share feedback on their experiences—for example, how safe they felt, whether the practitioner respected their pronouns, or if further LGBTQI+ education might be needed.

Day to day, Amber leads much of the front-end work, engaging with partners, businesses and consumers, while Nat manages the back-end, focusing on research, liaising with user interface designers and contractors, and developing practitioner resources. Together, they aim to create a positive online environment for both users and providers. Rather than spotlighting unsafe practitioners, they prioritize empowering users to connect with supportive professionals and involve practitioners directly in the website's development.

To grow their network, Nat and Amber partner with community groups and non-profits such as the Burnett Foundation, Qtopia and Rainbow Youth. These organizations, which had expanded their focus beyond initial intent, to cover healthcare access, share data and maps that PEERS have been able to consolidate into a single, accessible service. Such collaborations also provided valuable external perspectives on how to make the platform more responsive to community needs.

Through focus groups and interviews in Auckland and Christchurch, Amber and Nat have learned that community members face diverse challenges, many of which vary by gender. AFAB participants reported unmet needs related to menopause and cervical screenings, which could be overlooked if gender markers had changed or if practitioners were uncertain about how to address the topics sensitively. AMAB (assigned male at birth) participants faced parallel challenges, while some cisgender participants also expressed discomfort with practitioners of a different gender performing intimate screenings. This feedback guided platform development, including filters for practitioner gender and the creation of educational resources to help providers address sensitive issues with gender-diverse clients. It also informed priorities for site functions such as detailed sorting by services and specialties, which remain under development with ongoing practitioner input.

Driven by a vision of transforming New Zealand's healthcare landscape, Nat and Amber recognize the resistance they encounter, particularly from some practitioners concerned that the platform might highlight gaps in medical practice. They therefore choose to emphasize the positive skills and



*Our strength comes from being **deeply rooted in our communities.** By collaborating with trusted charities and support networks, we have built trust and amplified our presence. This empowers us to advocate for women, disabled individuals and the diverse voices within the **LGBTQI+ community, helping them navigate the broader health system and driving meaningful change together.***

Nat Young, co-founder of PEERS



knowledge that practitioners bring rather than focus on shortcomings. They have found that resilience, kindness and compassion are essential to overcoming resistance and building a health system that is safe, accessible and inclusive for all.

A vision for empowering community and practitioners

These young leaders have already gained recognition for their impactful work. Nat was nominated for the Y25 programme, an initiative led by YWCA Aotearoa New Zealand that celebrates young women and nonbinary trailblazers making significant contributions to their

communities and the world. Amber was interviewed by the UNDP Youth Co:Lab about her efforts to support the LGBTQI+ community, and together they participated in the Electrify Programme, a women-focused accelerator that provided connections and insights to strengthen their venture.

Nat and Amber continue to advance PEERS by promoting the platform and building partnerships to drive greater engagement. They are currently collaborating with the Burnett Foundation to increase visibility and recruit more inclusive practitioners. They are also working with an LGBTQI+ user interface designer to enhance the site's functionality and, eventually, track sex-disaggregated data.

Looking ahead, Nat and Amber plan to expand PEERS by offering practitioners educational resources, accreditation and data to strengthen inclusive practice. Their long-term vision is to transform New Zealand's healthcare system, prioritizing safety and accessibility for gender-diverse individuals and women. Their long-term vision includes scaling the initiative nationwide, extending to Australia and, eventually, globally. To ensure sustainability and accountability, they also intend to pursue B-Corp certification, embedding social and environmental responsibility and transparency across all operations.

The UN Women Asia-Pacific WEPs Awards recognize exemplary private sector actions to advance gender equality and women's empowerment within a specific category, location, and time period. Recognition as an awardee does not imply endorsement by UN Women of the organization or of individuals, nor does it constitute a formal partnership. Any claims, statements, or endorsements made by awardees remain the responsibility of the respective private sector organization and do not reflect the official policies or positions of UN Women.

Women's Empowerment Principles



High-Level Corporate Leadership



Treat all Women and Men Fairly at Work without Discrimination



Employee Health, Well-Being and Safety



Education and Training for Career Advancement




Enterprise Development, Supply Chain and Marketing Practices







Community Initiatives and Advocacy



Measurement and Reporting

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