

# Treatment of substance use problems: Reflections

**Before starting a new series of Background Briefings, Professor David Clark reflects on a variety of aspects related to treatment of substance use problems.**

**Most people who try illicit drugs or drink alcohol do not go on to experience problems. However, a significant minority do experience problems that eventually impact negatively on their physical and mental health and their social circumstances.**

This harm can arise from the direct negative effects of drugs (eg long-term alcohol causes liver damage), indirect effects arising from repeated withdrawal symptoms (eg depression from long-term cocaine use), and the negative effects arising from the lifestyle associated with illegal street drugs (eg homelessness).

Long-term drug or alcohol use can lead to dependence or addiction. In simple terms, addiction can be seen as an impairment of a person's ability or power to choose. The substance becomes more important than other aspects of their life, which the majority of people would consider as essential. Addiction drives forward heavy and persistent substance use, ultimately increasing the incidence of harm.

Addiction is a complex condition involving biological, psychological and sociological components that represents a major challenge to treatment practitioners. Unfortunately, there are no magic bullets or simple interventions that are all embracing in the treatment of addiction.

Drug and alcohol treatment services exist primarily to help and support those people who develop problems from their use of drugs and/or alcohol. A range of services and agencies have evolved that aim to reduce the harm that individuals cause to themselves.

Treatment may involve clients abstaining from drugs or alcohol completely, or may involve a form of harm minimisation, such as encouraging clients to use clean needles to inject in order to minimise the risk of infections, such as HIV or hepatitis.

People present for treatment, advice and support at various stages of their substance-using career. Therefore, treatment agencies need to be able to respond to a variety of different situations that may involve different interventions.

Some people who use drugs recreationally may only require information and advice from a treatment agency. Others can be helped by a brief intervention. For example, a brief intervention may involve the assessment of alcohol intake and alcohol-related problems, followed by information about how to cut down on drinking and use a drink diary.

Some people present for treatment with severe substance use problems. A significant proportion of



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these people will present with a variety of other intimately related problems. They may be homeless, jobless and experiencing problems with personal relationships, have a history of criminal activity, and have a physical and/or mental health problem.

People with severe substance use problems often require an extensive package of treatment and aftercare, sometimes involving medical, psychological and social interventions. The importance of aftercare should not be under-estimated. It is much easier to stop, than to stay stopped.

It is widely accepted that the best approach to treating a person with a serious substance use problem is to treat the individual as a whole (holistically), rather than simply focusing on trying to reduce his or her intake of substances.

Thus, in trying to help people overcome their substance use problem, treatment services may need to help clients access other forms of support, such as housing services, social services, mental health services, education and vocational training.

Practitioners must also be aware that addiction is a relapsing condition. Some people remain abstinent for many months or years before initiating substance use again, while others continue to periodically pop in and out of treatment agencies over long periods of time.

Other people who visit a treatment agency permanently abstain from drugs and alcohol and go on to lead full and healthy lives. In fact, their recovery may represent a better life than they had prior to developing their substance use problem.

Many people seek out treatment services because they want to stop using substances, but believe they cannot do it themselves. They look to other people to help them overcome their substance use problem.

Some of these people find they cannot just stop using, so it is essential they receive support that helps them minimise the harm that drugs and the drug-using lifestyle cause them.

They may decide after an initial visit to an agency to use needle exchange facilities, and at a later stage feel ready to engage in a methadone programme. Some time later, they may decide that they want to be abstinent from all substances, but this process may involve various stages. Some people access treatment because they are seeking relief from the discomfort or pressures of a drug-using lifestyle. The day-to-day existence of someone with a serious substance use problem can be tough and the person may look to others for help in dealing with problems in their life.

Treatment agency workers can support users through periods of crisis, eg helping them deal with homelessness, problems receiving benefits, or health problems. Often their role will involve facilitating access to others who can provide more direct help.

In these circumstances, agency workers can take the opportunity to engage users in other services, educate the user about harm minimisation, and try to enhance motivation for behavioural change.