Improving Access to Drug and Alcohol Treatment Services for Women and South Asian People

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A report previously published in this journal (Morris and Burchess, 2009) outlined several groups currently underrepresented in drug and alcohol treatment services in Wolverhampton. Subsequent multi-method research was carried out to investigate how access to these services can be improved for the two most pertinent groups (as defined by local services): women and people with South Asian heritage. A range of recommendations are made by service users, carers and professionals, who also highlight the need to reduce the need for drug and alcohol treatment programmes by using education and early detection and intervention for at-risk individuals.

Key words: Drug awareness, alcohol, women, south Asian

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Background

This research has been commissioned by the All Saints and Blakenhall Community Development project (herein known as ABCD), Wolverhampton’s New Deal for Communities regeneration scheme, to inform ongoing work on its emerging Drugs and Alcohol Strategy.

Engaging substance misusers with treatment programmes has been shown to reduce vastly the cost of substance addiction: for every £1 spent on treatment, there is a saving of £9.50 to society as a whole (DoH, 2008). As drug problems often fuel social exclusion, anti-social behaviour and crime, effective treatment services can potentially improve all citizens’ quality of life and play an important part in wider community renewal and regeneration strategies, such as Wolverhampton’s ABCD project.

According to the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS) (2007-08), South Asian (10% of new referrals vs. 33% of ABCD population) and female substance misusers (fallen from 23% of referrals in 2007; 19% in 2008) are underrepresented in treatment services in Wolverhampton (Safer Wolverhampton Partnership, 2009). Due to a combination of social and economic factors, this figure is likely to be even lower in ABCD (Jordan, Roderisk and Martin, 2004).

This study set out to explore the barriers to service access facing women and South Asian people, and to develop ideas to overcome these difficulties, with a view to influencing local service development.
Methodology

The study examined barriers and facilitators to service access and engagement, through the following mediums:

- Comprehensive literature review
- Interviews with 15 female and 15 South Asian service users
- Interviews with 15 practitioners and service providers (statutory and partner agencies)
- Workshop for service users, carers and professionals

Results and recommendations

To increase engagement and retention of South Asian people in treatment, this paper proposes:

- Increased joint-working with existing services that are successfully engaging the South Asian community to overcome the barriers of:
  - Language
  - Lack of cultural sensitivity
  - Concerns about confidentiality
- Recommending that services advertise, in an appropriate range of languages, and that services do all they can to give service users choice in the ethnicity of their key worker.
- Relocating entrance to the main city centre assessment and treatment base to the discreet back door to address concerns about confidentiality and stigma
- To increase engagement and retention of women in treatment, it is recommended that:
  - The Women’s Health Improvement Network (or way of working) is extended across the service
  - Advertising/education work is carried out to reduce women’s concerns about child protection issues
  - An organisation assumes responsibility for housing and substance misuse to help women "make a fresh start"
  - A Clinical Psychologist is employed within Addiction Services in order to address psychological trauma underlying substance misuse
- The following, more general recommendations are also made:
  - Prevention through strategic, targeted education and early intervention work
  - Strategically advertising services and the holistic support available ¥ Further targeting prisons – reducing availability of drugs in prisons and increasing availability and continuity of treatment in (and coming out of) prison
  - Recruiting former service users as members of staff

Conclusions

This study set out to explore the barriers to service access facing women and South Asian people, and ideas to overcome these difficulties with a view to influencing local service development. The literature revealed wide ranging issues that needed to be considered in research and practice. These findings were corroborated by interviews and a workshop with service users, carers, and professionals, which highlighted some additional themes more pertinent to ABCD and the City of Wolverhampton.

The key findings emerging from this study provide some practice-based and anecdotal evidence that suggests that whilst local services are striving to improve access to services for underrepresented groups, substantial barriers clearly exist for many, and there is a great deal that could be done to overcome these problems in an innovative way.

The findings of this study have shown there is still much that can be done to develop the workforce and offer it support in working with, and preventing these issues. It is hoped that managers and commissioners will take heed of these findings, and incorporate them into future planning and service development.

Substance misuse is expected to increase as a direct result of the current economic climate. The overall number of new referrals to Drug and Alcohol Treatment Services is currently falling (Safer Wolverhampton Partnership, 2009). Unless services acknowledge these recommendations, numbers in treatment are likely to continue to stagnate, leading at best to additional long-term costs to society and the NHS; at worst to premature mortality and bereavement.
References


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