

Harm

Reduction

Position Statement

This UnitingCare ReGen (ReGen) Position Statement provides evidence-based recommendations for the expansion of Harm Reduction services in Australia.

Introduction

Alcohol and other drug policy in Australia is guided by a broad approach referred to as Harm Minimisation¹. This approach is consistent across jurisdictions as evidenced by the most recent Victorian drug policy². Harm Minimisation has three key components:

1. Supply Reduction (reducing the availability of drugs in Australia, for example, through law enforcement activities).
2. Demand Reduction (reducing the individual and community drivers for drug use through prevention and treatment activities).
3. Harm Reduction (reducing the harmful consequences for those currently engaged in drug use, for example, through needle and syringe provision).

Supply Reduction is generally the responsibility of government (through legislation) and statutory bodies such as customs, police and courts. Alcohol and drug treatment services typically focus on Demand and Harm Reduction approaches to alcohol and other drug use.

ReGen believes that:

- Harm Reduction services do not condone alcohol and other drug use but provide practical support to people who are actively involved in alcohol and other drug use
- Many of the harms associated with alcohol and other drug use can be reduced or are preventable. Substantial future harms to individuals, families and the community can be reduced or prevented by providing people with accurate information and appropriate services
- Harm Reduction services provide an important access point for other treatment programs
- Harm Reduction supports recovery and effectively complements Demand Reduction services such as withdrawal, rehabilitation and counselling.

Rationale

The overall rationale for Harm Reduction is based on the recognition that, in spite of any Supply or Demand Reduction initiatives that may be undertaken, there will always be some degree of alcohol and other drug use in society. Harm Reduction's primary focus is not on alcohol and other drug use per se, but on reducing the associated harms. In spite of the broad range of positions within the community on the effectiveness of a Harm Reduction approach, an evidence-based assessment makes clear that it reduces the social and economic costs associated with alcohol and other drug use and provides a pragmatic approach to working with people who do not want to reduce or cease their consumption³.

For example, the early implementation of Harm Reduction approaches (e.g. Needle and Syringe Programs) in Australia has resulted in some of the lowest levels of HIV amongst injecting populations in the world³ and Australia is often considered to set the world standard for needle and syringe provision.

Most Harm Reduction approaches, such as opioid substitution therapy (OST), needle and syringe provision and overdose responses, are comparatively inexpensive, easy to implement and are supported by cost-benefit analyses. They are regularly found to have a highly positive impact on individual and community health, resulting in high social and economic benefits for a low cost⁴.

The recently released Victorian drug policy has strengthened harm reduction strategies by:

- Exploring models for the distribution of naloxone to potential overdose witnesses in an attempt to reduce overdose deaths
- Increasing the availability of needles and syringes
- Removing the GP training requirement for the prescription of suboxone to up to five clients as part of the OST program (2).

ReGen recommends that:

- State and Federal Governments continue to support evidence-based Harm Reduction initiatives and explore innovative approaches that have been demonstrated to be effective in other countries.
- Government, communities and the alcohol and other drug sector work together to increase the effectiveness and public understanding of Harm Reduction services.

ReGen resolves to:

- Continue to base our treatment and education services on both Demand and Harm Reduction principles
- Develop, deliver and review Harm Reduction services that best meet community needs within the current scope of legislation, policy and best practice
- Advocate for the introduction and/or expansion of key Harm Reduction services in Victoria
- Support the introduction of innovative harm reduction strategies accompanied by built-in evaluation and dissemination strategies
- Continue to maintain up-to-date knowledge of the effectiveness of Harm Reduction practices for users of alcohol and other substances
- Disseminate this position statement among our communication networks and appropriate forums.

Further Reading

Accompanying Supporting Evidence available at www.regen.org.au

References

1. Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (2011) The National Drug Strategy 2010-2015: 1. A framework for action on alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, Canberra.
2. Department of Health (2012). Reducing the alcohol and drug toll: Victoria's plan 2013-2017. Victorian Government, Melbourne.
3. Commonwealth of Australia (2010) 2. National HIV Strategy (Sixth) 2010-2013, Canberra.
4. Global Commission on Drug Policy (2011) 3. Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, Rio de Janeiro.
5. National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research (2009) 4. Return on Investment 2: Evaluating the cost effectiveness of needle and syringe programs in Australia, Australian Government, Canberra.

Disclaimer

This Position Statement is a general guide designed to provide information to assist decision-making and is based on the best evidence available at the time of publication. While every care has been taken in preparing this document, ReGen and our stakeholders, do not warrant, expressly or impliedly, or assume any legal liability or responsibility for, the accuracy, completeness, or usefulness of any information or process contained in this publication.

Authorised by the Board of ReGen

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About ReGen

Our purpose is to promote health and reduce alcohol and other drug related harm.

ReGen is the lead Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD) treatment and education agency of UnitingCare Victoria and Tasmania. ReGen is a not-for-profit agency, which has over 40 years experience delivering a comprehensive range of AOD treatment and education services to the community.

These services include Counselling and Support, Assessment and Intake, Community Outpatient, Home-based and Residential Withdrawal for adults and youth, Supported Accommodation, Drug Diversion programs, Youth and Family Services, an Intensive Playgroup, Alcohol Community Rehabilitation Program and AOD services at Port Phillip Prison. ReGen also delivers Education and Training programs nationally.

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