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Engaging with communities to address drug and alcohol issues

OVERVIEW

Most health workers or drug and alcohol workers in communities have the respect of that community, and knowledge about drug and alcohol issues, but they may not have the skills or training to engage or educate community members.

A worker may be stuck at their desk, either swamped with work, or sitting there with nothing to do. Particularly if they are not from that community, they may find it challenging to work out how to engage with that community.

This section gives an overview of ways a person can work with and support the community to prevent drug and alcohol problems, or reduce their harms. This section focuses on community-based efforts. Work with individuals and families are covered in other sections (e.g. Counselling, p. 20; What families can do, p. 62).

LETTING COMMUNITIES KNOW ABOUT THE ROLE OF THE WORKER

Even though the drug and alcohol worker is there in the clinic or other centre, the community may not know that this worker can help with drug and alcohol issues. Workers often have broad roles (e.g. men's health), and the community may see them driving cars, cooking barbeques, and not realise that they can offer counselling or can link people to drug and alcohol treatment. Also, communities may not know about the full range of treatments available – for example, they may believe that live-in rehab is the only treatment possible; and they may not know about the possibility of home detox (see Home detox, p. 88).

It is the responsibility of the worker to build a strong relationship with the community. This can be done through information days, barbeques and community events and meeting with key agencies (e.g. hospitals, schools, youth services, police). The worker can also provide training at 'in-services' for local agencies.

Community events, such as drug- and alcohol-free entertainment, can be timed to link with drug action week, youth week or other key dates. Sometimes a visiting event or program, such as 'Vibe 3-on-3' or another sporting or cultural occasion can provide the focus.

If the worker is not from the community, they need to understand the local cultural protocol, which is different from area to area. Working with a local person is a good way to learn about this. Also, talking to senior groups is helpful. In general you should ask permission from relevant community leaders before running a community event. There may be something else important planned for that date. You should also consult with community members on how to run a culturally-specific community event. There may be gender-based barriers; for example, a male drug and alcohol worker may not be able to talk about Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders, while sometimes community leaders may give permission for a male to talk about women's issues. Always seek local advice.

These issues are important, even in the city, but are particularly important in a rural and remote setting. If you are seen to be doing the right thing and respecting community, you are much more likely to get community support.

Getting to know the community

If you are new to a remote community, you should go out and speak with local elders or leaders of each clan group (male and female). Introduce yourself, say where you are from, a bit about yourself and who invited you, and ask permission to offer to give some education or to plan an event on drug and alcohol issues. They will tell you what you can talk about and what you cannot, and also advise on any other cultural barriers you may face.

You can also ask community leaders: "Is there anything else you want us to talk about?" This way, the leaders can advise on particular local issues. What is important to you as a drug and alcohol worker may not be important to the community – so it is important to line up your efforts with community priorities.

GETTING COMMUNITIES THINKING AND ACTING

How to prevent drug and alcohol problems from ever starting

You may be able to help provide support to programs that are already running; for example, camps, disco nights, competitions, sports days and other activities. These activities are alternatives to substance use and can help address boredom and isolation, and also help bring communities together. Cultural activities (including painting, dance, fishing, hunting) also play an important role and can help to make individuals and communities stronger. Sometimes the most valuable education opportunities

happen in a more informal setting when people are relaxed. Other times, if you are new to the community or the role, you may not do any education, but merely let the community have time to get to know who you are and what your role is.

Communities need holistic support, not just education on facts about drug and alcohol issues. Many communities are well aware of the harms of drugs or alcohol, and in some communities education has been 'done to death'. Practical support, like helping people get to a camp, can help. Actually being in the community, and taking the opportunities that arise to offer support or to provide education, can often be more important than a formal education session, particularly in remote settings. In cities, because of the larger population, more structured approaches may also be needed; for example, holding an event at a set time.

If education is to be given around drugs and alcohol, it should be tailored to that community. In a rural setting, you can seek advice on the best setting (e.g. camp, community meeting room).

You need to carefully think about what type of education is offered; for example, what gender and age groups will be invited to attend, and whether you will be speaking to groups who already have problems (sometimes or all the time), or to groups with a mix of people. There is a risk that if you just tell young people about the harms of drugs, they may get curious and want to try them. However, if a person is already using drugs or alcohol, then education to reduce the harms is very important. If you are not sure about these issues, seek advice and training from someone trained in health promotion.

It is also important to be sure that your knowledge is up to date (see *Keeping up your skills*, p. 406).

How to help people or communities with drug and alcohol issues

Sometimes the person's alcohol or drug issues may be not their main concern, but a symptom of other major problems, such as overcrowded housing, family violence, lack of employment or money problems. Tackling those underlying problems, for the individual and the community, can be the key to moving forward.

Some communities may decide that there are so many alcohol problems that they would like to restrict access to alcohol, either for the whole community or certain areas (dry areas). This chapter also talks about how this can be done, and what communities can do about clubs, bottle shops or other locations that are not responsible in how they sell alcohol.

Cultural reasons why some staff may not be able to work with other staff

Be aware that some workers may not be able to talk to particular people because of family relationships (kinship), e.g. they cannot talk to their cousin or father-in-law because of cultural reasons. Do not assume that the worker is 'not doing their job' as there may be other reasons why they appear to not want to talk to a particular community member.

Working with the shopkeeper or other supply source can also be important in addressing issues such as glue, other inhalants and tobacco. Simple measures like keeping glue out of reach (e.g. up high on a shelf) or behind the counter can make a difference.

The role of locally developed messages about alcohol or drugs

It can be useful to work with community leaders, other community members and agencies (such as health and education) to raise awareness that sickness can be caused by alcohol or drugs. If the community speaks their own language, it can be useful to use messages about sickness in the local language and building on local understandings and concepts.

To address their own drug and alcohol use

In some Aboriginal communities, non-drinkers may be concerned if a worker drinks at all, even if that worker only drinks a small amount. Workers need to be aware that drugs and alcohol are sensitive areas. In a small community, the worker should try to be discreet. For example, if the worker is seen every night at the pub drinking until closing time, they may lose credibility when working with their community to address alcohol issues. On the other hand, if they have a quiet drink at home (only if they do not live in a dry community!) this may not be an issue for the community.

Where the health worker is a smoker, and needs to do community education around smoking, this can be challenging. Both discretion and honesty are needed, but key information can still be provided to the community on how to access support to cut down and quit cigarettes.

The community's strengths and barriers to address drug and alcohol issues

Every community has its own priorities, and also its own strengths and barriers to address drug and alcohol issues. It is important to understand these, and also any specific challenges that the community may have to tackle.

How to reduce the harms of drug and alcohol issues even if the user does not want to change

Even if a community cannot change the level of alcohol or drug use right now, there may be things that they can do to reduce the harms from alcohol, tobacco or other drug use. Work with the community to help identify measures that could work (e.g. night patrol).

You may also need to work with the community sensitively if there is concern about harm reduction measures such as Needle and Syringe Programs.

Providing alternative night-time activities can help to reduce harms among young people and young adults. Simple measures like turning off the lights at the basketball courts at 10pm could be tried to encourage people to go home. Having well lit streets can also discourage dangerous or illegal activities.

Ideally police would also work with communities to tackle drug and alcohol issues, and to respect community priorities and ways of working within local cultural protocols. There are examples of police officers who do this very well, and others who struggle.

Working between agencies (e.g. schools, sport and rec, health, family support agencies; in both government and non-government agencies) can greatly increase your chance of a community-wide effect.

As a drug and alcohol worker there are a lot of challenges; however, your work with community can make a big difference. There are many examples where communities have made big changes, when they are supported by key agencies.

What communities can do to prevent or limit drinking problems

STOPPING ALCOHOL PROBLEMS BEFORE THEY START (PREVENTION)

Keeping communities and families strong and connected can help reduce the chance of young people ever developing alcohol problems. Increasing the opportunities for young people and all community members to be involved with culture, education and training, jobs, and sport and recreation are important.

As well as this, communities can try to either lessen people's interest in alcohol (demand reduction) or they can try to reduce its supply (supply reduction). Education about the harms of alcohol has a useful role, but of course many families already know many of the harms of alcohol all too well. They often have seen these harms first-hand. But families may not be aware of the silent harms from alcohol (e.g. that alcohol makes them more likely to develop diabetes or high blood pressure, that it interferes with sleep and causes depression and anxiety). Education programs that help give young people the skills to say 'no' to alcohol when others around them are drinking can also be useful.

It can be a challenge to get a community to change how they think about drinking, so that more people can stop at one or two drinks, and not put themselves at risk by drinking to intoxication.

We know that limiting the supply of alcohol (including the number of pubs, and the times they open) is more effective than education in reducing the harms from alcohol. This can include trying to keep children or young people under 18 years of age from having access to alcohol.

Having good treatment available for parents and friends with alcohol and drug or mental health problems will help make life easier for their children, and so help prevent alcohol problems being passed on from one generation to the next.

LIMITING THE SUPPLY OF ALCOHOL

The more alcohol that a community drinks, the more chance of short-term harms like fights and assaults, car accidents and other injuries. Also, there is more chance of long-term harms like brain damage and liver cirrhosis. The amount of alcohol that is consumed in a community depends on how much is made available by those who sell it (supply), and how much community members want to drink (demand). To reduce the harms from drinking too much, we need to: reduce the 'supply', reduce the 'demand'

for alcohol and use strategies to reduce immediate harms from drinking (e.g. using community patrols and sobering-up shelters). This section talks about some ways to limit the supply of alcohol in communities to help reduce harms seen from drinking.

Existing liquor licensing laws

In Australia, to address the problems seen from drinking, all states and territories have liquor laws, which restrict the supply of alcohol. This includes:

- Restricting who can sell alcohol, i.e. can only be sold by people who have a license (known as ‘licensees’) and their employees.
- Alcohol can only be sold from venues that have a liquor license (‘licensed venues’), e.g. hotels, taverns, nightclubs and restaurants.
- Making sure that the way alcohol is sold in licensed venues is responsible (‘responsible service of alcohol’), i.e. not serving to people who are drunk.
- Restricting who is allowed to buy alcohol or who alcohol can be sold to, e.g. young people aged 17 years or younger (‘minors’) or people who are intoxicated are not allowed to buy or be supplied with alcohol.
- Restricting the days or times during the day when alcohol can be sold.

It is important that these laws are enforced to help reduce the harms from problem drinking. Any breaches of these laws should be reported to liquor licensing authorities or to the police.

Some situations when liquor licensing laws are used

- *If a new venue wants to sell alcohol:* an application to sell alcohol needs to be made to the liquor licensing office in your state or territory. Individuals or communities can object to applications being made to grant new licenses by contacting the same liquor licensing office.
- *If an existing venue wants to change when and how they are allowed to sell alcohol:* the person or people who have a liquor license (‘licensees’) are allowed to apply to change the conditions under which their original license was granted. For example, they may want to increase the sales of alcohol by extending their trading hours or expanding the size of their premises. But licensing laws also allow for individuals or communities to object to any proposed changes if they believe the changes are likely to increase alcohol-related harm.
- *If communities or individuals want to object to how alcohol is being sold from a particular venue:* liquor licensing laws allow for individuals or communities to object to how alcohol is sold if they believe the licensee is not following the conditions of their liquor license and/or if they are worried about alcohol-related harm occurring as a result of drinking at a particular venue or in the community generally.

Liquor licensing offices in each state and territory

<i>Australian Capital Territory</i> www.ors.act.gov.au/community/liquor	<i>South Australia</i> www.olgc.sa.gov.au
<i>New South Wales</i> www.olgr.nsw.gov.au	<i>Tasmania</i> www.gaming.tas.gov.au
<i>Northern Territory</i> www.nt.gov.au/justice/commission	<i>Victoria</i> www.responsiblealcohol.vic.gov.au
<i>Queensland</i> www.olgr.qld.gov.au	<i>Western Australia</i> www.rgl.wa.gov.au

OTHER LIQUOR RESTRICTIONS

The licensing laws discussed above may differ between individual states or territories. In addition to these general restrictions, licensing laws also allow people to apply for additional restrictions in particular towns or on particular licensed premises. Some of these other ways that supply of alcohol can be restricted to help communities address drinking are discussed below. Communities should contact the liquor licensing office in their state or territory to talk about how they can apply for additional restrictions on alcohol supply.

Restrictions on trading hours

Efforts to reduce trading hours for drinking in a venue ('on-premises consumption') and to reduce when people can buy alcohol to drink at home ('takeaways') can help address problem drinking and related harms. In Australia, some community groups have successfully lobbied for reductions in trading hours in towns such as Alice Springs and Tennant Creek. At one time in Tennant Creek, there was a complete ban on takeaway sales on Thursdays (sometimes known as 'thirsty Thursday').

Restrictions on the sale of low-cost beverages

The cheaper alcoholic drinks are, the more alcohol is consumed. The cost of a 'standard drink' – a drink containing 10g of pure alcohol – varies considerably because of the costs of making, packaging and distributing it and also because of the tax on alcohol. In many communities, bans have been placed on the sale of cask wine in containers of more than two litres – as alcohol sold in this way is usually cheaper and gives drinkers 'more bang for their buck'. Limiting the availability of low-cost drinks has shown to be an effective way to help reduce problem drinking.

Other price controls

Another effective way to reduce how much people drink is to make alcohol more expensive. This has been shown to help reduce how much alcohol is consumed by heavier as well as the more moderate drinkers. As we have seen, banning low-cost drinks such as cask wine can be effective at the local level. One of the most effective ways to reduce the availability of cheap alcohol more broadly is to increase the tax on alcohol. Unfortunately, successive Commonwealth Governments – which have responsibility for alcohol taxation – have been reluctant to make the necessary changes, but several groups around the country continue to lobby for changes to be made in relation to tax on alcohol.

Another way to increase the cost of alcohol is to set a minimum price below which a standard drink cannot be sold. This is sometimes called a ‘floor price’ (e.g. prohibiting the sale of alcohol below the price of a middy or pot of beer). This has not been tried in Australia, but state or territory governments are able to implement it, and groups in the NT have been strongly lobbying the NT Government to do this.

Reducing the number of licensed premises

The level of drinking is related to the number and types of licensed premises. As far back as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, there have been calls for governments to reduce the number of licensed premises in some towns. Governments have generally been reluctant to do this, but in Alice Springs community lobbying has led to the ‘buy-back’ of three liquor licenses.

Dry community declarations

Depending on the state or territory, under either liquor licensing laws or Aboriginal land legislation, it is possible for some discrete Aboriginal communities to declare their communities ‘dry’ – that is, to prohibit the sale or consumption of alcohol within their boundaries. These bans have generally proven to be effective in reducing both the health and social problems associated with alcohol consumption.

Local dry areas

In some areas, local or state/territory governments have banned the consumption of alcohol in certain public areas within towns (such as in Adelaide or Port Augusta) or within a certain radius of licensed premises (as under the 'Two Kilometre Law' in the NT). Unlike 'dry community declarations', these have not shown to be effective. They simply move public drinking to other areas – often where there are fewer controls over drunken behaviour.

Liquor licensing accords

In some places, local licensees have agreements or 'accords' among themselves to impose voluntary restrictions on the sale of alcohol. These accords can have some benefits, but unlike the restrictions discussed above – which are imposed (often as a result of community lobbying) by licensing authorities or other government agencies – these accords cannot be enforced by law. This, along with the commercial self-interest of licensees, can limit their effectiveness.

Prohibiting sales to Aboriginal people

While some of the restrictions discussed above may be implicitly targeted at Aboriginal people, they do not discriminate in that they apply to all citizens within the set areas. However, in some places (such as Curtin Springs in the NT) Aboriginal communities have applied for the prohibition of sales to local Aboriginal residents. This requires application for a special exemption under the Racial Discrimination Act. Without such an exemption, this restriction is illegal.

Evasion of restrictions

Wherever restrictions on the supply of alcohol exist, there will be some people who try to get around them; for example, by 'sly-grogging' or by buying alcohol to drink from other towns. However, despite these attempts to get around restrictions, most communities and experts find that the benefits of restricting the supply of alcohol outweigh the harms.

SUMMARY

As well as the liquor licensing laws that apply generally across states and territories, there are additional restrictions on the supply of alcohol that communities can lobby for. The evidence shows that where restrictions are enforced (in a culturally sensitive manner), most are effective. However, restrictions on supply are not a simple solution. They need to be used alongside measures such as treatment, education and strengthening communities and young people (to reduce the demand for alcohol). They also need to be combined with measures to address the harms here and now, using approaches such as community patrols and sobering-up shelters (harm reduction).

FURTHER READING

Go to the Indigenous HealthInfoNet website and type *alcohol restrictions* in the search box: www.healthinfonet.ecu.edu.au.