

Alcohol and Mental Health Co-morbidity

Alcohol Misuse and Mental Health Comorbidity in General Practice

General practice is a health care setting where there are frequent presentations by people with alcohol problems and common co-morbidities such as depression and anxiety.

For consumers and carers and their service providers, alcohol and mental health problems are often inextricably linked. Community prevalence is common – about one in four persons with an anxiety, affective or substance use disorder also have at least one other disorder (Andrews et al, 1999).

Relevant Policy Frameworks

Current national strategies in the alcohol, drugs and mental health arenas developed by Australian Health Ministers have all nominated primary health care as a key setting. The August NSW Alcohol Summit is the most recent event to underscore the significant public health impact of this issue.

In particular, the National Mental Health Plan 2003-2008 and the National Drug Strategic Framework describe the need to improve service responsiveness in the area of alcohol and mental health comorbidity.

Some investment has also been made in both better chronic disease management in general practice, such as SNAP trials, and primary mental health care reform under the National Primary Mental Health Care Initiative and the *Better Outcomes in Mental Health Care* Initiative (where alcohol disorders are included as treatable disorders).

The Managing Alcohol and Mental Health Co-morbidity in Primary Care Project

A robust primary care response is a critical part of a comprehensive, quality approach to the care of people experiencing alcohol problems and common co-morbidities such as depression and anxiety.

Building capacity and skills for better prevention and management of co-morbidity in general practice has been a progressive process across relevant programs run by Divisions of General Practice such as drug and alcohol, mental health and youth health

Project Objectives

In order to strengthen the level and quality of care for people with co-morbidity in the primary care setting, recent reviews suggest a number of steps need to be taken. These include more systematic and integrated shared care programs, skills development for GPs in the area of addictions and mental health, clinical support for GPs and practice staff to respond to complex comorbid presentations, and appropriate consumer education resources for use in the GP consultation and/or surgery.

The Project's primary objectives are to:

- improve the knowledge, skills and capacity of the general practice sector in the prevention and management of high prevalence alcohol and mental health co-morbidities in primary care
- build a critical mass of GPs and practice staff competent in the prevention, management and referral of alcohol and mental health comorbidity

Project Dimensions

The proposed project design takes into account the fact that Divisions of General Practice will be at differing stages of interest and activity in comorbidity.

It is proposed that the project will have three domains of activity:

- Development and dissemination of information, awareness and self-help resources for GPs, practices and consumers/carers for use in waiting rooms and consultations;
- Skills training for GPs in the management and prevention of comorbidity linked to both existing professional accreditation and quality assurance requirements and peer support initiatives
- Funding to individual Divisions or clusters of Divisions interested in being supported to pursue additional approaches such as building systems or models of collaborative care and strengthened referral pathways with local health and other providers.

It is intended that the project will deliver a range of outcomes including:

- Greater awareness in the general practice setting of the prevalence of alcohol and mental health comorbidity
- Strengthened screening by GPs for alcohol and mental health comorbidity
- Clinical approaches to comorbidity will be available to GPs in a way that relates to their setting
- A critical mass of GPs and practice staff
- More confident in comorbidity identification and treatment
- Enhanced engagement between public drug and alcohol and mental health services and Divisions for shared care and specialist support
- Models of shared care and enhanced referral pathways
- Contributions to public health literature and relevant conferences

Project Partners

The Project is a government-community-general practice collaboration involving the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AER), the Mental Health Council of Australia, the Australian Government Departments of Health and Ageing and Veterans Affairs, and ADGP. The Primary Mental Health Australian Resource Centre based at the Department of General Practice, Flinders University will manage the evaluation.

The project is funded by the AER with financial and in-kind contributions from other partners.

The Project will be co-ordinated by ADGP in conjunction with advice and suggestions from an expert reference group.

For more information

Australian Divisions of General Practice:
www.adgp.com.au

Primary Mental Health Care Australian Resource Centre:
<http://som.flinders.edu.au/FUSA/PARC>

Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation: www.aerf.com.au

Mental Health Council of Australia:
www.mhca.com.au

Contact

Leanne Wells
Principal Adviser
Mental Health
Australian Division of General Practice
Ph 02 6228 0854
Fax 02 6228 0899
E-mail lwells@adgp.com.au