

A Hidden Population, A Hidden Problem: Exploring Drug & Alcohol Treatment Barriers for Older Adults in Rural Australia.

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Introduction: Alcohol and other drug problems contribute to increased harm throughout the lifespan, yet there remains limited understanding of the experiences and needs of older adults in this area. With an ageing population and the underdiagnosis of alcohol and other drug problems within this demographic, understanding the factors that influence treatment access for older adults is critical for improving health care.

Methods: A critical realist qualitative approach was used, with data collected in focus groups to gather insights from health workers in specialised drug and alcohol services, and older adult-focused services. Participants were asked about their perceptions and experiences of working with older adults who have alcohol or other drug problems, including exploration of barriers and enablers to treatment access.

Key Findings: Preliminary findings indicate that alcohol is the primary substance of concern among older adults, yet the problem remains largely hidden due to generational social norms and cultural factors. Many older adults do not identify their use as a problem, and health workers report feeling ill-equipped to respond due to role constraints and concerns of harming therapeutic relationships.

Discussions and Conclusions: The complex transitions related to ageing, including wide-ranging health and social changes, necessitate a nuanced approach to treatment. The findings highlight the need for education initiatives in health services and the community, and the establishment of referral pathways and specialised services that consider the unique challenges faced by older adults.

Implications for Practice or Policy: The findings underscore the importance of integrating substance use discussions into routine care for older adults. Policymakers should prioritise resource allocation for health worker education and training, developing health promotion initiatives for rural communities, and establishing clear referral pathways to ensure older adults receive appropriate treatment and support. Addressing these problems is vital for enhancing treatment access and improving health outcomes for older adults.

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