

Understanding, utilising and supporting the contributions of AOD workers with lived experience

ANKE VAN DER STERREN^{1,2}, ELISABETH YARBAKSH^{1,3}, DEVIN BOWLES¹

¹*Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA), Canberra, Australia,* ²*School of Population Health, UNSW Sydney, Sydney, Australia,* ³*College of Arts and Social Sciences, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia*

Presenter's email: anke@atoda.org.au

Introduction: Workers with lived experience of problematic alcohol and other drug (AOD) use bring unique perspectives and skills to their practice. This paper aims to: identify the prevalence of lived experience among the AOD workforce in the ACT; compare the characteristics of AOD workers with and without lived experience; describe how lived experience influences the practice of AOD workers; and identify areas of appropriate support.

Method: The Workers' Survey of the 2021 ACT AOD Workforce Profile (n=188) included items measuring demographic and workforce characteristics and wellbeing, and asked workers to describe how their lived experience influences their work. Data have been analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis.

Key findings: Thirty-five percent of workers responding to the survey identified as having current or past personal experience of AOD problems. They were more likely to be male; identify as LGBTIQ+; have lower education; be in direct-client-contact roles; work full-time; report being smokers; have lower physical and overall wellbeing; and report higher burnout.

Many respondents felt their lived AOD experience added value to their roles by improving their understanding of client needs; enabling greater empathy and compassion; reducing judgmental attitudes towards clients; improving their practical knowledge and skills; and positively influencing their career choices and trajectories.

Discussions and Conclusions: Understanding specific characteristics of lived-experience AOD workers and their perspectives on how experience shapes their practice provides insight towards better utilisation of their unique contributions, and towards supporting their work and wellbeing.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Considering the large proportion of the AOD workforce with lived experience of problematic AOD use, these understandings are critical to improving AOD workforce recruitment, retention and professional development pathways; ensuring supportive, non-discriminatory workplaces; and providing high-quality AOD treatment and support to clients.

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