

Disrupting traditional evaluation: Embedding Indigenous leadership in routine data collection at two Aboriginal residential alcohol and other drug services

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Introduction. Traditional approaches to data collection and evaluation in alcohol and other drug (AOD) services often marginalise First Nations ways of knowing, being and doing. This study challenges conventional Western models by embedding Indigenous leadership and participatory methods in the design and implementation of a routine data collection system at two Aboriginal AOD residential rehabilitation services in rural Queensland.

Methods. A participatory evaluation approach was used to co-develop culturally grounded tools with Aboriginal staff and clients, including the Aboriginal Resilience and Recovery Questionnaire (ARRQ), WHOQOL-BREF and other AOD outcome measures. Indigenous staff were trained to lead data collection and interpretation, with ongoing capacity building and reflective practice central to the process.

Key findings. Embedding outcome monitoring within a culturally safe, family-centric model disrupted traditional evaluation frameworks and centred Indigenous experiences of healing and recovery. Clients described data collection as therapeutic, while staff leadership strengthened ownership of evaluation processes. Challenges to sustaining data collection included staff turnover, limited IT infrastructure and post-treatment engagement barriers, highlighting structural constraints requiring systemic change.

Discussion and conclusions. This study demonstrates how deconstructing traditional evaluation practices and privileging Aboriginal leadership fosters more meaningful, sustainable and empowering approaches to quality improvement in AOD services. Data collection becomes not just a measurement tool but an act of cultural affirmation and therapeutic reflection.

Implications for practice. Disrupting conventional evaluation requires services to embed First Nations leadership, prioritise participatory methods and reframe outcome monitoring as a culturally embedded, client-led process. Systems must adapt to support Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing at every stage of service delivery and evaluation.

Disclosure of interest statement

This work was supported by the Queensland Mental Health Commission.