

Continuing care for young people: What works from the perspective of staff and young people?

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Introduction *There is growing interest in 'continuing care' as a way to better support people exiting AOD treatment. Continuing care is particularly important for young people who tend to have less experience in the care system and therefore less knowledge and skill for managing post-treatment. This paper analyses qualitative interview data from staff and clients of an Australian youth continuing care program to identify the program mechanisms that work to keep young people engaged over the long term with care.*

Method *We interviewed 20 participants including 11 current and former program clients aged 17 to 25 years and nine program staff.*

Key Findings *Analysis identified five program mechanisms that supported participants to stay engaged with care and manage their substance use over the long term. These were:*

Offering 'person-centred counselling' based on unconditional positive regard and empathy which helped young people to improve their relationships, build autonomy, and to facilitate self-learning;

Establishing relationship stability between staff and clients through 'straight-up', clear and respectful communication, and through staff practising patience, persistence, flexibility, discretion, care and perceptiveness, and optimism;

Creating safety and inclusion in program spaces and interpersonal interactions by challenging instances of prejudice and discrimination, acknowledging client histories of trauma, and referring on and collaborating with other expert support services;

Offering modes of ordering care that attended to a client's preferred order and pace, such as education, housing, employment, and social connection initiatives that aligned with clients' lifegoals;

Preserving organizational memory so to safeguard quality support over the long term through high quality record-keeping, training and mentoring of caseworkers, and acknowledging and supporting the stressful nature of the work.

Discussions and Conclusions *Participants reported that the best continuing care for young people is holistic, includes regular and sustained contact, is youth-led, establishes links with community services and other support structures, and provides care within a safe, person-centred, and situated framework.*

Implications for policy and practice.

These program mechanisms reveal the architecture through which continuing care programs for young people can be delivered using principles that are relevant to and valued by young people.

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