Preparing Social Workers for AOD-Related Practice: Reflections on Early-Career Challenges and Capability Needs

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Introduction: Social workers frequently support clients impacted by alcohol and other drugs (AOD). However, longstanding international concerns about workforce preparedness have highlighted the need for improved pre-service and graduate AOD education that reflects contemporary practice demands. This Australian-first study examined social workers' reflections on early-career preparedness for AOD-related practice.

Method: Two open-ended questions in a national online survey [1] asked social workers to reflect on their early career experiences working with clients impacted by AOD to describe challenges, as well as perceived capability gaps in skills and knowledge. Of 227 participants, 137 provided responses to at least one of the two open-ended questions.

Key Findings: Challenges were categorised as emotional, practice and organisational, while capability needs related to self-management, practice and knowledge. Some findings reflected broader early-career social work pressures however, most challenges and capability gaps related specifically to AOD practice.

Discussions and Conclusions: Findings confirm and extend longstanding international literature on the need to improve social workers' readiness for practice with people impacted by AOD. In particular, this study highlights four priority areas for AOD-related training and clinical supervision during learning and post-graduation training: 1) foundational AOD knowledge; 2) skills for interacting and communicating with clients impacted by AOD; 3) applying person-centred principles to AOD work; and 4) challenging stigma.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: Without deliberate and sustained integration of AOD content within qualifying programs, longstanding gaps in preparedness are likely to persist, with implications for workforce confidence, capability and sustainability, as well as client care and outcomes. The study provides evidence to inform workforce development, curriculum review, and clinical supervision in social work education. Improving preparedness for AOD-related practice may support more empathetic and stigma-aware care, strengthen referral pathways, and improve engagement and help-seeking among clients impacted by AOD.

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References

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