

Identifying High-Priority Elements of Harm Reduction Practices in Japan: A Delphi Study

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Introduction

- Japan's drug policy maintains a strict zero-tolerance stance. However, people who use drugs and healthcare professionals have recognized the importance of harm reduction (HR) approaches for treatment and community services in Japan.
- This study aimed to identify high-priority key elements of HR practices through a Delphi study.

Methods

Participants

- People who had knowledge of HR principles and practices, and provided/received existing treatment and community services in Japan
- Three stakeholders :
 - People with lived and living experience of drug/alcohol use disorders
 - Their family members
 - Healthcare professionals and researchers

Delphi Survey

- A two-round online Delphi survey
- An 83-item list of key elements regarding HR practices
 - Developed through a previous focus group interview study by the authors
 - 11 categories
- Consensus criteria
 - 70% or more of respondents rated an item as “important” or “very important”

Results

- **Participants**

- A total of 67 participants among 87 candidates
 - People with lived/living experience: n=18
 - Family: n=15
 - Healthcare professionals: n=34

- **Response rate**

- First round: 77.0%, Second round: 86.6%

- **Consensus items reached as high-priority key elements**

- 65/83 the original items (78.3%)
 - First round: 62 items, Second round: 3 items

Example of the items of key elements

Person-Centered Services

- **Develop services based on the needs of individuals and families affected by substance use.**
- **Include the voices of PWUD in planning and delivering HR support.**
- **Provide outreach services in areas where HR is needed.**
- **Ensure access to safety information and peer-shared knowledge.**
- **Support grassroots HR initiatives led by PWUD communities.**

Light gray: Items that did not reach consensus

Infrastructure for Providing HR Services

- Offer a range of harm reduction (HR) service options.
- Deliver HR services in community-based settings.
- Ensure equitable access to HR support across all regions.
- Reduce financial barriers for those accessing HR services.
- Facilitate dialogue among policymakers, researchers, providers, and service users.
- Promote research and evidence generation on the effectiveness of HR approaches.
- Secure adequate staffing and funding for personalized HR care.
- Encourage active participation of government and public institutions.
- Develop HR services tailored to the Japanese context.
- Demonstrate cost-effectiveness in terms of time and human resources.
- Support active roles for NGOs and private organizations in delivering HR.
- Allow appropriate legal intervention in cases of harmful behavior (e.g., violence, theft).

Systems for Implementing HR Services

- **Ensure learning opportunities on harm reduction for all providers, including peer staff.**
- **Develop and distribute manuals and guidelines for HR-based support.**
- **Provide mutual support systems for HR practitioners.**
- **Foster equal collaboration within multidisciplinary teams, including peer staff.**
- **Promote interagency coordination across medical, public health, and welfare sectors.**

Anti-stigma Efforts and Human Rights Protection

- **Respect the human rights and privacy of PWUD.**
- **Encourage respectful and non-stigmatizing media coverage of PWUD.**
- **Build a stigma-free society where PWUD and families are not isolated.**
- **Ensure access to basic needs, employment, and financial support for individuals with lived or living experience.**
- **Avoid excluding individuals from services due to alcohol use.**

Prevention of Drug-Related Harms

- **Ensure access to care without fear of legal consequences.**
- **Provide legal aid and strategies to avoid harm from arrest.**
- **Support overdose prevention.**
- **Share information on the risks of prescription and OTC drugs and strategies to reduce harm from non-medical use.**
- Decriminalize drug use and treat it as a health issue.
- Offer safer substitution treatment (e.g., methadone programs).
- Distribute drug test kits for substance adulterants and post-use detection.
- Regulate the manufacturing, sale, and accessibility of OTC drugs to reduce the risk of non-medical use.

Prevention of Alcohol-Related Harms

- Prevent harms related to alcohol use (e.g., injury to self or others).
- Prevent driving under the influence of alcohol.
- Create environments where alcohol is not casually encouraged.
- Leverage alcohol-related issues as entry points for offering support.
- Restrict alcohol availability.
- Promote access to alcohol-free beverages.
- Offer alcohol reduction treatment in primary and workplace health care.

Skills and Attitudes Required for HR Services Providers

- Equip providers with the knowledge and skills necessary for HR and substance-related harm.
- Share accurate, evidence-based information about drugs and their effects.
- Identify harm collaboratively with each individual, rather than making assumptions.
- Respect each person's right to self-determination.
- Provide support that prevents harm related to isolation (e.g., escalating use, death).
- Deliver inclusive care for marginalized groups (e.g., women, minors, LGBTQ+ individuals, formerly incarcerated individuals).
- Provide alcohol reduction treatment with regular assessment and adjustments.
- Recommend abstinence-based environments when needed to prevent severe harm.
- Coordinate access to a range of HR services based on individual needs.
- Take a tolerant, harm-reduction approach to manageable risks rather than strict control.
- Maintain persistence without becoming pessimistic.

Conclusion

- The Delphi survey identified 65 high-priority elements of HR practices.
- The principles widely accepted internationally may not be well understood or acknowledged in Japan.
- International HR practices (e.g., drug consumption rooms, methadone maintenance therapy, drug-checking, peer-led initiatives) may not be readily transferable to the Japanese context and warrant further examination.
- There appears to be limited support for drug policy reform. Given that drug use remains criminalized in Japan, further discussion is needed on how HR services can be provided and accessed safely.
- More specific discussions are needed concerning the implementation of individual practices (who, what, when, where, why, and how).