

WHAT DO PARAMEDICS THINK OF CLIENTS WHO PRESENT WITH ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG AND MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES? A QUALITATIVE STUDY.

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Introduction and aims:

Around one-fifth of ambulance attendances are associated with alcohol or other drug (AOD) or mental health issues. While these issues are often stigmatised and portrayed in the media as placing a high burden on ambulance services, little research has examined paramedics' attitudes toward clients with AOD and mental health issues. Given that paramedics' attitudes can impact on how clients are treated, this is a noteworthy gap.

Method:

We conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with 73 paramedics across Australia. Common themes were identified using thematic analysis.

Key findings or results:

We identified three main themes. First, paramedics expressed a range of compassionate attitudes, including expressions of empathy, a desire to help irrespective of the presentation type, and an acknowledgement that AOD and mental health issues are often connected to broader socio-economic factors rather than simply being the result of individual behaviours/choices. Second, they communicated a range of potentially stigmatising attitudes, including that these clients are often 'erratic', 'out of control' and potentially 'dangerous'. Finally, and connected to the second theme, some paramedics also expressed frustration that providing care to some of these clients was a 'waste of time' and felt that paramedic safety was compromised.

Discussion and conclusions:

We identified a range of compassionate and stigmatising attitudes towards clients with AOD and mental health issues. Identification of varying attitudes allows for greater insight into paramedic understandings and experiences, and reiterates the need for targeted training around AOD and mental health presentations.

Implications for Practice or Policy:

Findings may be used to inform education and training to counteract potentially stigmatising attitudes and further promote the compassionate attitudes expressed by some paramedics in our study.

Implications for Translational Research:

Understanding the range of attitudes allows for tailored training packages to be designed to better support the needs of paramedics and clients.

This project was funded by the Movember Foundation. No pharmaceutical or alcohol industry grants were received in the development of this study.