

“They’re scared to ask for help”: The role of criminality on the health outcomes of anabolic-androgenic steroid (AAS) users

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Introduction: Among anabolic-androgenic steroid (AAS) users are generally not willing to discuss use to ‘outsiders’ and this makes them a ‘hard-to-reach’ group for medical/health professionals. Adding to the challenge is the criminal element which AAS use represents, given the number of national AAS arrests increased 218 per cent over the last decade.

Method: This study triangulated views of male (n=8) and female (n=7) AAS users (Mage=35.4, SD=9.1) as well as healthcare providers (N=8) regarding how the criminality surrounding AAS had an impact on AAS users’ health behaviours and help-seeking. Data were analysed thematically.

Key Findings: An overarching narrative was developed regarding the harms which emerge from the illegality of AAS with three overarching themes: “They’re scared to ask for help”: The tension arising from punitive measures, Stressed and Fearful: Legal ramifications are the biggest obstacle, and Criminality and Health Engagement: “What if the police are watching me”.

Discussions and Conclusions: Findings suggest the role of criminality in AAS user’s decision-making is significant and providers alike are aware of the barrier which the criminal element represents. Given the lack of a dedicated harm reduction framework for AAS, users turn to peers for advice.

Implications for Practice or Policy: This juxtaposition between healthcare provision and harm reduction underscores discord between government policy and the needs of the users and practitioners. Further research is required with the specific intention to build evidence for the revision of AAS policy in Australia.