The relationship between loneliness and health literacy among people accessing residential substance use disorder treatment

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Introduction: Loneliness is a growing public health concern linked to poor health outcomes. Similarly, low health literacy is associated with stigma and increased risk of mortality. People accessing treatment for a substance use disorder experience high rates of loneliness and lower health literacy. This study examines the relationship between health literacy and loneliness among people accessing residential substance use disorder treatment.

Method: Participants were 560 individuals attending non-government substance use disorder treatment services across Australia. Data were collected upon entry into the residential facility. A three-item loneliness scale adapted from the Revised University of California Los Angeles Loneliness Scale and the nine-domain Health Literacy Questionnaire was used. Analysis included correlation analysis (Spearman's rho) and linear regression controlling for age and gender.

Key Findings: Loneliness was significantly negatively correlated with all nine domains of health literacy (rs = –0.17 to –0.39, all ρ <0.001), indicating lower health literacy was associated with greater loneliness. Health literacy and age and gender accounted for 23% of the variance in loneliness, $F(9, 554) = 18.26$, $p < .001$. High health literacy on domain 3 "Actively manage health" ($β = –.22$, $p < .001$), domain 4 "Social support for health" ($β = –.32$, $p < .001$) and domain 7 "Navigating the healthcare system" ($β = –.26$, $p < .001$) was significantly associated with lower loneliness.

Discussion and Conclusions: Loneliness was associated with lower health literacy among people accessing residential substance use treatment.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Treatment services should assess health literacy and loneliness among consumers due to the negative implications and increased risk of mortality. Consumers ability to actively manage their health, access social support for their health and navigate the healthcare system appear to be most protective against loneliness. Targeting these health literacy domains which may improve loneliness and other outcomes.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: There are no conflicts of interest to declare.