

Women, Pain and substance use: When the ‘pain killers’ stop working.

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Introduction: This presentation will provide a snapshot of findings and recommendations from VAADA’s submission to the Victorian Inquiry into Women’s Pain which identifies the strong intersection between pain and substance use by women who have accessed AOD treatment.

Method:

- Open survey and one-on-one interviews with women who identify as having experienced pain and AOD use issues.
- AOD sector consultation workshop.
- Consultations with peak bodies and professionals.

Key Findings: There is a significant correlation between women’s experience of pain and substance use. This complex, multi-directional relationship often traps women in a cycle of psychological distress, substance dependence and pain without providing adequate solutions. There is a complex cultural and ethical conundrum within the health and medical system requiring a delicate balance between supporting the management of pain and prescribing drugs of dependence. The way in which women who experience pain (both before and after substance use) want to receive support and treatment is not aligned with current health care delivery models, which are constrained by limitations relating to time, relationship building and capacity to address drug dependence appropriately. Victoria’s AOD sector needs leadership and resourcing to minimise the risk of substance dependence amongst women who experience pain and ensure women who use substances receive treatment and support for pain without fear, judgement and delay.

Discussions and Conclusions:

1. Victoria needs a gendered approach to AOD treatment.
2. Medical professionals require enhanced support on the responsible use of drugs of dependence in relation to women’s pain.
3. Further research on the intersections of women’s pain and substance use/dependence is needed.
4. Resource the AOD sector to enhance capacity for working with trauma.
5. Co-design of a stigma audit tool that supports AOD organisations to identify stigmatising policy and practice.

Disclosure of Interest Statement: