

ONLINE ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUG COUNSELLING: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

Authors:

Presentation 1

MICHAEL SAVIC^{1,2}, ELLA DILKES-FRAYNE³, ADRIAN CARTER³, RENATA KOKANOVIC⁴, VICTORIA MANNING^{1,2}, & DAN LUBMAN^{1,2}.

¹ Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University, Box Hill, VIC, ² Turning Point, Eastern Health, Fitzroy, VIC, ³ Monash Institute of Cognitive and Clinical Neurosciences, School of Psychological Sciences, Monash University, Clayton, VIC, ⁴ Centre for Applied Social Research, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC.

Presenter's email:

MichaelS@turningpoint.org.au

Aim of abstract:

Online interventions have proliferated in recent years for a range of health issues, including alcohol and other drug (AOD) use and addiction. Despite the vast opportunities for new technologies to improve the health and wellbeing of people who use AODs or support them to reduce or cease consumption, little research has explored current or future uses of digital technologies to do so. In this symposium we draw together three presentations regarding one particular online intervention, online AOD counselling, to explore the possibilities and challenges of the online medium for supporting people who consume AODs, their family and friends. We aim to engage the audience in a discussion about the opportunities for research and improving online programs, both in their ability to provide standalone services, and to support existing face-to-face services.

Presentation 1 – What does online alcohol and other drug counselling do? An analysis of policy and practice perspectives

Presenting authors:

Michael Savic

Introduction / Issues:

Online alcohol and other drug (AOD) interventions, such as online counselling, have proliferated in Australia and across the globe. However, there is ambiguity around their role and function in policy, and it's unclear how they act in practice.

Method / Approach:

We examine how online AOD counselling interventions are framed in Australia's current AOD policy, and compare this with empirical analyses of quantitative and qualitative data from a national online AOD counselling service, *Counselling Online*.

Key Findings:

Online AOD counselling seems to perform a greater range of functions beyond what is envisaged in policy. Policy frames online counselling as a brief intervention targeting AOD use and as an avenue to facilitate referral to face-to-face AOD treatment services. In contrast, the lived experience of *Counselling Online* points to the varied ways in which online counselling acts in practice. These include online counselling as attending to concerns beyond AOD use, as a treatment in its own right, and as working in conjunction with face-to-face AOD treatment services.

Discussions and Conclusions:

Our analysis suggests that there is friction between the way online AOD counselling is framed in policy and experienced in practice. Particular points of friction centred upon whether online counselling is a treatment intervention, and the degree to which it addresses wellbeing concerns beyond AOD. It is important to acknowledge and engage with these points of friction as it has implications for how the concerns of people who access online AOD counselling services can be addressed.

Implications for Practice or Policy:

Policy makers and funders need to appreciate the multiple things online AOD counselling does if online AOD counselling is to be flexible enough to meet clients' needs in their complexity.

Implications for Translational Research:

This research could inform the development of novel online AOD counselling programs.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This paper is based on data collected as part of projects funded by the Lord Mayor's Charitable Foundation, and by Monash University. No pharmaceutical or alcohol industry grants were received in the development of this study.

Presentation 2 – Supporting partners of individuals with problem AOD use through online counselling

Presentation 2

SAMARA R. WILSON¹, MARIE B. H. YAP^{1, 5}, SIMONE RODDA^{3, 4}, VICTORIA MANNING^{2, 3}, DAN I. LUBMAN^{2, 3}

¹*School of Psychological Sciences, Monash Institute of Cognitive and Clinical Neurosciences, Monash University, Clayton, Australia;* ²*Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University, Box Hill, Victoria, Australia;* ³*Turning Point, Eastern Health, Fitzroy, Australia;* ⁴*School of Population Health, University of Auckland, New Zealand;* ⁵*School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne.*

Presenter's email:

samara.wilson@monash.edu; marie.yap@monash.edu

Introduction:

Problematic alcohol and other drug (AOD) use impacts partners heavily, increasing their risk of domestic violence, financial issues, health problems, and relationship issues. Previous research has focussed on mostly female, married partners, of problem alcohol users, or combined all family members in samples. Recruiting a broader sample can be challenging as many partners find it difficult to seek help due to barriers such as shame, stigma, and practical constraints. Online counselling may help reduce such barriers, providing an opportunity to explore multiple impacts from a potentially broader sample of partners, who may or may not have sought help before.

Method:

One hundred transcripts of partners of individuals with problem AOD use were sampled from a 24-hour national AOD synchronous online chat counselling service. Descriptive content analysis and thematic analysis were used to investigate themes related to the personal impacts, interpersonal impacts, and online help-seeking.

Results:

Personal impacts identified were reflected in partners' cognitions (difficulty coping, responsibility, trust, and safety); behaviours (adaptive and maladaptive coping); and affect (anger, sadness, and fear). Interpersonal impacts included intimate relationship issues; parenting concerns; and social network impacts. Help-seeking themes related to the reason for accessing online counselling; discussing help-seeking and coping processes; and planning for future assistance.

Conclusions:

These findings highlight the substantial burden that problematic AOD use imposes on intimate partners personally, reinforcing the need for services to engage partners as valid help-seekers in their own right. Online counselling may be a useful modality for partners seeking help to complement existing face-to-face services.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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Presentation 3 – Online AOD counselling for family and friends: A qualitative analysis of an online 'therapeutic landscape'

Presentation 3

ELLA DILKES-FRAYNE¹, MICHAEL SAVIC^{2,3}, ADRIAN CARTER¹, RENATA KOKANOVIC⁴.

¹ Monash Institute of Cognitive and Clinical Neurosciences, School of Psychological Sciences, Monash University, Clayton, VIC, ² Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University, Box Hill, VIC, ³ Turning Point, Eastern Health, Fitzroy, VIC, ⁴ Centre for Applied Social Research, RMIT University, Melbourne, VIC.

Presenter's email:

ella.dilkes-frayne@monash.edu

Nominated chair:

Dr Robyn Dwyer, Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, La Trobe University, Melbourne, VIC

Chair's e-mail address:

R.Dwyer@latrobe.edu.au

Introduction / Issues:

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) use can significantly impact family and friends. These groups also play a key role in supporting people to reduce consumption or seek help. However, family and friends face similar issues accessing support services (e.g. availability, cost, location, stigma). Anonymous, 24-hour online counselling can overcome many of these barriers. Little research has explored how online counselling may improve family and friends' wellbeing and ability to cope and support their loved ones.

Method / Approach:

We thematically analysed 90 transcripts of online counselling sessions with family and friends of people who use alcohol, opioids and amphetamines. Our analysis employed the notion of 'therapeutic landscapes' – spaces that promote health and wellbeing – to explore how online counselling enabled and constrained potentially therapeutic encounters.

Key Findings:

Online counselling opened up a private time and space in which people could air their concerns; plan how to talk with their loved one or encourage them to seek treatment; reframe narratives or develop new understandings of the issues; and connect with local services. The online medium posed a number of constraints, fostering brief encounters limited by typing speed and Internet access, and at times producing stilted exchanges or misunderstandings.

Discussions and Conclusions:

Online counselling enabled a range of positive encounters for family and friends, however, these were not always realised due to the constraints of the online medium. We discuss how online counselling may act as a therapeutic landscape to enhance people's wellbeing and capacity to support their loved ones.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This research was funded by the Faculty of Arts and Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences, Monash University. No pharmaceutical or alcohol industry grants were received in the development of this study.

Discussion section

The discussion section of the symposium will involve a brief summation of the presentations by the session chair/discussant, Dr Robyn Dwyer, and raise a number of discussion points around the opportunities and challenges of online services to address the community's needs with regard to problematic AOD consumption. The audience will be encouraged to both provide feedback on the research presented, which will enhance the presenters' future research and analysis, and to engage in a discussion of the possibilities for improving online services for their service clients and research populations. The desired outcome is a greater appreciation of the policy sphere and current online counselling practice, and the opportunities and pitfalls of the online medium for service provision and research.