

Concerns and experiences of alcohol and other drug healthcare staff regarding intoxication detection and driving safety with opioid treatment clients

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Introduction: Alcohol and other drug (AOD) staff must be mindful of client intoxication during presentations, including for opioid agonist treatment (OAT). While stable OAT clients are typically fit to drive, use of sedating substances can result in intoxication, impacting driving ability. We examined the concerns and clinical experiences of AOD staff regarding intoxication detection and driving safety with OAT clients.

Method: Cross-sectional survey of public OAT clinic staff in New South Wales. The survey examined substances/medications of concern, confidence and training in intoxication detection/management, and reported barriers or experiences from intoxication assessments. Surveys, taking 10-minutes, were completed between January 2020-June 2021.

Results: Seventy-nine staff (58% nursing, 19% allied health, 16% medical) participated with an average 9.3 years' AOD experience. Concern regarding client intoxication and driving safety with alcohol (92%) and illicit drug use (e.g., heroin=93%; cannabis=92%) were prevalent. Around half indicated intoxication or driving safety concerns with OAT (methadone=58%; buprenorphine=52%), alongside other medications including benzodiazepines (95%), other opioids (87%), z-drugs (81%) and pregabalin (73%).

Two-thirds of staff sampled indicated confidence identifying client intoxication, with 56% reporting at least one intoxication presentation in the past year. Reported barriers to addressing suspected client intoxication included concerns of aggression (72%), upsetting the client (44%), incorrect assessments (38%), and time-pressures (37%). Staff reported experiencing client distress (68%), aggression (57%), and damage to therapeutic relationships (34%) due to intoxication assessments.

Discussions and Conclusions: While many AOD staff feel relatively confident in identifying intoxication, they identified several concerns regarding intoxication assessments and client driving safety. These concerns may be addressed, in part, with improved client education.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Intoxication assessment training/management form an important part of AOD treatment. Ensuring staff have the time and skills to undertake intoxication assessments will be of benefit to clients, their driving safety, and the opioid treatment program.

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