

Exploring drug use in older adults: Navigating challenges toward healthy ageing

Peter Higgs^{1,2}, Jane Dicka³

¹Burnet Institute, Melbourne, Australia, ²Department of Public Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, ³Harm Reduction Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

Presenters' emails: p.higgs@latrobe.edu.au; janed@hrvic.org.au

Abstract:

The growing number of older adults who use or inject drugs is indicative of broader demographic trends including Australia's ageing population. As more individuals live longer, some continue drug use into later life, raising new challenges for our health and social care systems.

This presentation draws on a combination of data from published literature and firsthand accounts gathered through observations and interviews with individuals who continue to use and inject drugs well into their 50s and older. By merging published academic research with the lived experiences of older adults who use drugs, this presentation uses the unique access to people's lives achieved through a sustained presence in Melbourne street drug markets since the mid-1990s. These insights provide a nuanced understanding of the complex health and medical challenges faced by this population. These challenges include the onset of chronic diseases, mental health issues, and complications arising from their long-term drug use - issues are also frequently exacerbated by the process of ageing. In addition to the health perspective, the presentation delves into the significant social impacts of sustained drug use among older Australians. This includes exploring the stigma, social isolation, and marginalisation that these individuals often encounter, which can further complicate their ability to access the healthcare and other social/welfare services they require.

In recognising these multifaceted issues, the presentation also focuses on the need for comprehensive approaches that aim to enhance the quality of life for older adults with histories of injecting drug use. It will highlight evidence-based practices, harm reduction strategies, and integrated care models that not only address the immediate medical needs but also consider the broader social aspects of people's lives, ultimately encouraging a more holistic approach to their well-being.