

Does diversion into AOD treatment improve health outcomes? An evaluation of the NSW MERIT program.

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Introduction: The Magistrates Early Referral Into Treatment (MERIT) program is a voluntary, pre-plea program for adults in the Local Court who have issues related to their alcohol and/or other drug (AOD) use. MERIT provides access to a range of AOD treatment services for 12 weeks while court matters are adjourned. MERIT is an inter-agency partnership between the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, NSW Police and NSW Health. MERIT aims to improve health and justice outcomes for participants and the community.

Method: We will employ propensity score methods to compare two matched groups of people; one group will be eligible and accepted onto MERIT and the other group will be eligible but not accepted onto MERIT. We will compare the incidence of ambulance call outs, emergency department visits, unplanned hospital admissions and mortality between the two groups and further analyze by drug type and demographic characteristics.

Key Results: Results are expected to identify health outcomes for people accepted onto MERIT compared to those not accepted onto MERIT.

Discussions: We will discuss the prevalence of drug types and participant demographics and their relationship with the study outcomes.

Implications for Practice or Policy: These results may inform further expansion of MERIT in NSW and build the evidence for diverting people away from the criminal justice system into health services. Results may assist in identifying areas for MERIT program improvement and the client groups in need of additional support. Results will also be used to inform an economic evaluation of the MERIT program.

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