

Stigma towards people who use drugs in frontline non-clinical healthcare workers

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Introduction: Non-clinical staff are often the face of healthcare services but, compared with clinicians, are less likely to have evidence-informed training around substance use behaviours. Despite their essential role, stigmatising attitudes towards people who inject drugs have not been investigated in this population. We assessed stigmatising attitudes towards people who inject drugs in non-clinical health workers and compare these to clinician perspectives.

Methods: An online survey of health workers in Australia (recruited via Qualtrics research panels) measured attitudes towards people who inject drugs. Ordinal logistic regression was used to determine association between worker role and stigmatising views.

Results: Among 351 participants, 129 (37%) were non-clinical staff, and 222 (63%) clinical. Of 39 items assessing attitudes there were significant differences in 12 (31%) items. Compared with clinical staff, non-clinical staff had significantly lower odds of endorsing that people who inject drugs have no reason to avoid being around others, that they should have the same access to care as anyone else, and that healthcare workers should not be able to refuse care (all $p < 0.05$). Non-clinical staff had higher odds of endorsing that people who inject drugs were disgusting, have weak characters, and should use separate healthcare facilities (all $p < 0.05$). Importantly, non-clinicians had higher odds of reporting that they did not know how to act around people who inject drugs ($p = 0.009$).

Discussions and Conclusions: These findings suggest that the attitudes and behaviours of non-clinical staff towards people who inject drugs need further consideration in stigma reduction strategies and research.

Implications on communities, practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: Services and policy makers must ensure that educational stigma-reduction resources are both made available to, and specifically developed for, non-clinical healthcare workers to ensure they are supported to provide a stigma-free environment.

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