

RESPONSE TO “NATIONAL HARM REDUCTION STRATEGY”

PRINCIPLES THAT UNDERPIN THE STRATEGY

- The Government has a role in managing the harmful effects of alcohol because it is already an active participant in the process. It influences level of consumption through taxation and other forms of access – it is not an impartial observer.

CULTURAL AND BEHAVIOURAL ISSUES AROUND ALCOHOL USE

- Alcohol misuse is defined by the consequences of the use of alcohol – ie. It is misuse if it produces psychological social and physical harm. It is not necessarily the overall quantity that is drunk.

HEALTH PREVENTION, TREATMENT AND IMPACT ON THE NHS

- The most effective prevention is to raise awareness of all health professionals encountering high risk groups. Surveys show that 28% and 14% men and women respectively drink beyond the recommended levels. Among male admissions to medical wards 13 –20% have definite drinking problems and heavy drinkers are likely to visit their GPs more often than others. Improved awareness among medical and nursing staff will increase identification. Surveys of medical notes on general medical wards show that at best only one third record a drinking history. Options to raise awareness include:-
 - More training in undergraduate and postgraduate levels
 - Improved incentives for health screening
 - Local training initiatives involving local services – provides support and referral routes for generic health workers
- Alcohol should have a higher profile in Health Planning and Commissioning. With little interest at senior management levels alcohol will retain the image of a peripheral service issue. The remit of the Drug Action Teams must include alcohol. The separation of alcohol and illicit drugs is illogical from a health and indeed a criminal justice standpoint. Often there is dual abuse of both substances in the same patient group. The emphasis on illicit drugs in the funding streams has undermined alcohol services.

- Brief interventions have a place in the response to problematic drinking. However it must be recognised that patients may require a range of interventions – some longer and some shorter. Brief intervention is a “common sense” response of a health professional to identified problematic drinking. Brief interventions have received much research attention because of the training value and awareness raising potential of implementing “Brief intervention programmes”. The question should be how do we raise awareness among health workers.
- Alcohol misuse can be an acute or a chronic condition and treatment reflects this. Other medical conditions with behavioural aspects - such as diabetes - show similar levels of non compliance and relapse. An adequate assessment of the patient is required with appropriate follow up. Many areas have fragmented services for problematic drinkers and may rely on only non statutory or only NHS services. This geographical lottery of services could be addressed by the National Strategy.
- The most effective lesson we can learn from drug prevention and treatment is the effectiveness of a national strategy and co-ordinated programme of improvement of services. The most cost effective way of improving alcohol services is to extend the remit of Drug Action Teams to include alcohol.
- There are strong links between alcohol and mental health problems. To co-ordinate services staff first have to be aware of problems in their patients. Adequate training and raised profile of alcohol in service level agreements can improve this situation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

- Children are at risk directly through their parents behaviour and by setting patterns for future alcohol abuse in later life. Children services should work with both alcohol and illicit drugs as part of their mainstream work. This needs to be supported by the Training institutions, local health management and commissioners.
- Homeless people are vulnerable. Often non health professionals seek a solution of health needs before addressing other needs such as housing. There needs to be an awareness and knowledge of the issues in all professionals.

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