

Getting Serious about Stigma in Scotland: the problem with stigmatising drug users

SUMMARY

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Previous research has indicated that stigma towards current and former drug users and their families can cause considerable distress and may present a 'hidden' barrier to accessing help and achieving recovery from drug problems. Therefore, the UK Drug Policy Commission (UKDPC) undertook a programme of research to investigate the extent and nature of stigma towards people with a history of drug problems and their families in the UK.

The main study was funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation but, as part of the work in Scotland to realise the ambition in the Scottish drug strategy *The Road to Recovery*, the Scottish Drugs Recovery Consortium (SDRC) commissioned a boosted sample in Scotland. This report describes the findings and implications of the research for Scotland.

Overall the research, which was conducted in 2010, shows that the stigmatisation of people with drug problems has serious consequences for the delivery of government policy. Key policies such as those seeking greater reintegration and recovery and to move people from benefits into work will not succeed while stigmatising attitudes are pervasive.

If we are serious about recovery, we need to be serious about tackling stigma.

WHY STIGMA MATTERS

A qualitative study of the stigma experienced by current and ex-drug users and their families and the impact this has had on their lives was undertaken using focus groups and a web survey. The principal findings of this research were as follows:

- Feelings of shame and worthlessness prevent people and their families seeking help, which may exacerbate their problems.
- Low self-esteem prevents a belief in recovery, to which the long-term nature of stigma contributes.
- Participants in the research reported being stigmatised by professionals in a wide range of healthcare and social care settings. For example, many participants reported having problems obtaining pain relief, even when quite severely hurt, because of an implicit assumption that they were just after a 'fix'.
- The negative attitude of some social workers was an issue raised in many of the focus groups, both with drug users and their families. For many drug users the desire to care properly for their children is a key reason for trying to overcome their dependency, so this is an area that can have a huge impact on help-seeking

and recovery, although clearly a balance must be struck with respect to child protection.

- Stigma makes it difficult for people recovering from drug dependence to obtain jobs, which are important for reintegration and participation in society. For example, people in our study reported having offers of employment withdrawn when their history of drug use became known.
- The stereotypes and associated fear attached to people with drug problems and the assumption that they never change can cause difficulties for people with drug problems in both getting and retaining accommodation.

ATTITUDES TO DRUG DEPENDENCE IN SCOTLAND

A large UK-wide survey of public attitudes towards drug users was carried out in early 2010 (involving about 3,000 individuals). It included a boosted sample of 566 people aged 16 and over living in Scotland.

Significant proportions of people in the Scottish sample endorsed statements that show sympathy towards those with a history of drug problems and suggest they tend towards the view that drug dependence is an illness similar to other chronic conditions and are supportive of efforts to overcome it.

- Two-thirds (66%) of respondents agreed that “We have a responsibility to provide the best possible care for people with drug dependence” (32% strongly agreed).
- Over half (58%) of respondents agreed that “Drug dependence is an illness like any other chronic health problem”.
- 55% of respondents agreed that “Drug dependence is often caused by traumatic experiences” and that “We need to adopt a far more tolerant attitude towards people with a history of drug dependence”.
- The vast majority of respondents to the survey (83%) rejected the statement “People who become dependent on drugs are basically just bad people”, with almost two-thirds disagreeing strongly.
- A clear majority (82%) of respondents agreed that “Virtually anyone can become dependent on drugs”.

Respondents in Scotland also strongly believed that those with drug problems should have the same opportunity as others to get a job and recognised the importance of being part of the community to recovery from drug dependence.

- 80% of respondents agreed that “It is important for people recovering from drug dependence to be part of the normal community”.
- 75% of respondents agreed that “People recovering from drug dependence should have the same rights to a job as anyone else”.

Although there appears to be uncertainty, on balance, people in Scotland would appear to consider recovery from drug dependence to be possible – slightly more people disagreed with the statement “People can never completely recover from drug dependence” than agreed with it. However, only a small proportion, less than 1 in 10, think that people who have stopped using illicit drugs but are being prescribed medication such as methadone can be considered recovered – over three-quarters of respondents thought they could

not. These attitudes towards medication-assisted recovery are more negative than for the UK as a whole.

The survey also revealed high levels of both blame and intolerance and, in particular, levels of fear and exclusion of people with a history of drug dependence that were significantly higher than in the UK as a whole:

- Over half (56%) of respondents in Scotland agreed that “There is something about people with drug dependence that makes it easy to tell them from normal people”.
- Respondents in Scotland were more likely than people in the UK as a whole to agree that “Increased spending on services for people trying to overcome drug dependence is a waste of money” (32% did so, compared with only 24% in the UK).
- Over half (55%) of the Scottish sample agreed that “People with a history of drug dependence are a burden on society” (compared with 47% in the UK as a whole).
- Similarly, 49% agreed that “I would not want to live next door to someone who has been dependent on drugs” (compared with 43% in the UK as a whole).
- 40% of the Scottish residents agreed that “A person would be foolish to enter into a serious relationship with someone who has suffered from drug dependence, even if they seemed fully recovered” (33% in the overall UK sample agreed).
- Scottish residents were also more likely to disagree with the statement that “Residents have nothing to fear from people coming into the neighbourhood to use drug treatment services” (46% disagreed, compared with 33% overall).

This survey has captured a snapshot of public attitudes to drug dependence in Scotland and provides a baseline against which change can be measured.

THE PORTRAYAL OF DRUG USE AND USERS IN THE MEDIA

Loughborough Communications Research Centre undertook an analysis of a sample of British newspapers’ reporting of drug use stories over three time periods, including two Scottish papers (*The Daily Record* and *The Herald*). The overall findings were as follows:

- The reporting and portrayal of drug users was dominated by two overriding themes: crime reports, and professional sports people and celebrity figures.
- The drugs most often mentioned in news items were heroin, cannabis, cocaine and ecstasy.
- The issue and challenges of treatment and recovery were barely mentioned – except in the context of celebrities.
- Most reporting is considered to be ‘neutral’, but the linkage to crime aspects (rather than health) was overpowering.
- Where adjectives and labels are used they are more likely to be negative, using language such as ‘vile’, ‘hopeless’, ‘dirty’, ‘squalid’ and ‘evil’.

The Scottish newspapers included in the review generally followed the pattern for the sample as a whole, but with a greater concentration on heroin and other opiates in their coverage.

WHAT CAN BE DONE ABOUT STIGMA

There are examples from other sectors that show that attitudes and behaviours can be changed; for example, in the field of mental health and with respect to HIV/AIDS. Our research suggests that there are a number of key areas for potential action:

- **Improve the knowledge and understanding among the general public about drug dependency and recovery to reduce levels of fear and blame.**
To address public attitudes we suggest the formation of a broad coalition of groups working in the sector to develop campaigns similar to those that have been successful in addressing stigma towards people with mental health problems. The media also has a role to play and such a coalition could work with key people in the Scottish media to identify ways in which they can foster public understanding of drug problems, treatment and recovery.
- **Ensure workforce development across the range of professions who work with people with drug problems to improve service responses.**
Our study found many examples of stigma in the wide range of settings in which professionals come into contact with people with a history of drug dependence and their families, but there were also examples of good practice. The issue of stigma needs to be incorporated in professional training and workforce development programmes and examples of good practice identified and shared.
- **Remove the legislative and administrative barriers that reinforce stigmatisation towards people with drug dependency and addictions.**
Our study also revealed many instances where stigma has become formalised. These often arbitrary requirements provide barriers to recovery by restricting people's opportunities to participate in society.
- **Support and promote self-help and mutual aid bodies and the nascent drug-user recovery communities as vehicles for reintegration.**
Peer support is often a key component in achieving and sustaining recovery. Recovery communities can also provide a way of making recovery more visible and in this way challenging stigma and promoting greater public understanding of recovery.
- **Develop new ways to support and promote community participation and increased contact with recovering drug users in order to foster more constructive perceptions.**

This research highlights the importance of tackling stigma if people with drug problems and their families are to be able to access the support they need to overcome these problems. There is a need to challenge the entrenched and widespread assumption that drug users are solely culpable for their condition by educating people at all levels in society – including health professionals and the media – about the causes and nature of addiction. Stigma, by making assumptions about individuals and denying the possibility of change, works against government policy by putting barriers in the way of recovery.

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The full research report is available at www.ukdpc.org.uk/publications.shtml#Stigma_reports