

Getting Serious about Stigma: the problem with stigmatising drug users

A summary of findings

The stigmatisation of people with drug problems has serious consequences for government policy. Key policies seeking greater reintegration and recovery, the moving of people from benefits into work and a focus on public health will not succeed while stigmatising attitudes are pervasive. If we are serious about recovery and reintegration, we need to be serious about tackling stigma.

This paper summarises some key findings from new research looking at public attitudes, the way the press reports drug use, how those with drug problems and their families experience stigma and an examination of the evidence about stigma. The synthesis of these findings and the UK Drug Policy Commission's conclusions about what might be done to overcome stigmatisation can be found at: www.ukdpc.org.uk/publications.shtml#Stigma_reports

What can be done to reduce the stigma that impedes recovery?

- Improve the knowledge and understanding among the general public about drug dependency and recovery to reduce the levels of fear and blame.
- Ensure workforce development across the range of professions that work with people with drug problems to improve service responses.
- Remove the legislative and administrative barriers which reinforce stigmatisation towards people with drug dependency and addictions.
- Support and promote self-help and mutual aid bodies and the nascent drug-user recovery communities as vehicles for reintegration and normalisation.
- Engineer new ways to support and promote community participation and increased contact with recovering drug users in order to foster more constructive perceptions.

Why tackling stigma is important

Our research with drug users and their families highlighted a range of problems relating to stigma:

- Feelings of shame and worthlessness prevent people and their families seeking help, which may exacerbate their problems.
- The long-term nature of stigma contributes to low self-esteem and prevents a belief in recovery.
- Participants in the research reported being stigmatised by professionals in a wide range of health and social care settings.
- Stigma makes it difficult for people recovering from drug dependence to obtain jobs, which are important for reintegration and participation in society. Previous research found almost two-thirds of employers would not employ a former heroin or crack user, even if they were fit for the job, and people in our study reported having offers of employment withdrawn when their history of drug use became known.
- The assumption that people never recover from drug dependence can prevent people getting accommodation in areas where drug use has been a problem.

What the public think about people with a history of drug dependence

A large UK-wide survey of public attitudes towards drug users was carried out in early 2010. It is similar to one carried out about attitudes towards people with mental health problems.

- 58% of people think a lack of self-discipline and willpower is one of the main causes of drug dependence. But only 15% of people think this about mental illness.
- Only 5% of people think that people with a mental illness 'don't deserve our sympathy'. But 22% took this view towards those with drug dependence.
- Nearly 60% of people think drug dependence is a 'chronic illness like any other'. But nearly 80% think the same about mental illness.
- Only 9% of people said they would not want to live next door to someone with a mental illness. But 43% felt this about people with a history of drug dependence.
- 93% of people think those with a mental illness deserve the best possible care, but only 68% think the same about drug dependence.
- But, 64% of people think people with a drug dependence are 'too often demonised by the media'.

Findings from an analysis of press reporting about drug use

Loughborough Communication Research Centre undertook an analysis of a sample of British newspaper reporting of drug use stories over three time periods.

- The reporting and portrayal of drug users was dominated by two overriding themes: those of crime reports and of professional sports people and celebrity figures.
- The most reported drugs were cannabis, cocaine, heroin, 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, with words such as 'vile', 'hopeless', 'dirty', 'squalid' or 'evil'.

Conclusions

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.