

Monitoring the use of alcohol and other drugs in rural Australia

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Introduction: The misuse of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) is a significant public health issue, and may be associated with physical and mental health problems and have negative social and legal ramifications for users. Accordingly, problematic drug users often require support from a wide range of services, including specialist AOD services, hospitals, GPs and other primary health providers, as well as mental health and social services.

Knowledge of patterns of use and associated outcomes are needed to inform clinical and policy responses to AOD use. Although drug monitoring systems such as the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) have been implemented nationally for more than a decade, such projects focus only upon metropolitan centres. Indeed, very little research examining AOD use or interventions and service needs has been undertaken in rural Australia, and consequently little is known about these issues. This lack of knowledge is a concern as illicit drug markets, the characteristics of users and the harms they experience, and thus the services they require, are likely to vary between rural and metropolitan areas.

This presentation will provide an overview of what is known about the use of AOD in rural Australia, and consider how the implementation of a RDMS could address significant gaps in the knowledge and so inform appropriately targeted clinical and policy responses.

Methods: Consistent with the need to use multiple data sources in drug monitoring systems, the Rural Drug Monitoring System would monitor trends in rural drug use and associated harms by triangulating three data sources:

- existing indicators of drug-related issues and harms
- a quantitative survey of sentinel populations of drug users
- qualitative interviews with key experts who have regular contact with illicit drug users.

Importantly, the design of the proposed RDMS would build on the strengths of the rural AOD and related workforce and research community to ensure its sustainability and local relevance, whilst at the same time recognising the constraints and challenges of working in rural Australia.

Outcomes and implications: Accurate and timely information describing the substance use patterns and related issues facing rural communities is needed to identify which sub-populations are experiencing the greatest harm and inform improvements to and/or the development of new programs. A RDMS would provide the evidence required to ensure that evidence-based policies can be developed and services appropriately target those in need.