LANGUAGE MATTERS

The development of a resource to improve treatment access and reduce stigma in AOD treatment settings through a community partnership

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INTRODUCTION

Language mediates our perception of the world around us and is a potent measure of our attitudes. “Addict” “Junkie” “PWID” used carelessly position us in relation to people who inject. Language also has a powerful impact on how people see themselves and acts as a very real barrier to treatment access. The Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies (NADA) the peak body for AOD treatment services in NSW Australia, undertook to develop a language guide for members working with the NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA), the peak drug user agency in NSW>

METHOD

Resource development took place across three stages.

Stage One: A literature review was undertaken to examine guidelines and resources from comparable settings across the world. These resources were reviewed and compiled to produce a draft guide.

Stage Two: A series of focus groups were held in order to adapt the guide to the local context. Two service provider groups (n=16) and two service user groups (n=16) took place in Sydney NSW and resources were modified based on this feedback.

Stage 3: The resource was further refined based on key stakeholder testing with 24 people drawn from service provider and service user groups.

RESULTS

The guide has been successfully promoted with good uptake across multiple platforms including social media, web and wide use at service provider training forums in NSW demonstrating the need for a practical, easy to access guide for this setting.

CONCLUSION

Our attitudes towards substance use and how we respond rests on the concepts and language we use. We need to be less ambivalent, more mindful and deliberate about avoiding pejorative terms. Changing our language is an essential step towards person-centred treatment and reducing the stigma and marginalisation of people who use drugs.

Language matters

Language is powerful—especially when discussing alcohol and other drugs and the people who use them. Stigmatising language reinforces negative stereotypes. “Person-centred” language focuses on the person, not their substance use.

When working with people who use alcohol and other drugs...

try this	instead of this
substance use, non-prescribed use	abuse; misuse; problem use; non-compliant use
person who uses/injects drugs	drug user/abuser
person with a dependence on...	addict; junkie; druggie; alcoholic
person experiencing drug dependence	suffering from addiction; has a drug habit
person who has stopped using drugs	clean; sober; drug-free
person with lived experience of drug dependence	ex-addict; former addict; used to be a...
person disagrees	lacks insight; in denial; resistant; unmotivated
treatment has not been effective/chooses not to	not engaged; non-compliant
person’s needs are not being met	drug seeking; manipulative; splitting
currently using drugs	using again; fallen off the wagon; had a setback
no longer using drugs	stayed clean; maintained recovery
positive/negative urine drug screen	dirty/clean urine
used/unused syringe	dirty/clean needle; dirties
pharmacotherapy is treatment	replacing one drug for another

Adapted from *Language Matters* from the National Council for Behavioural Health, United States (2015) and Matua Raki, New Zealand (2016).

NADA network of alcohol and other drugs agencies

NUAA NSW USERS AND AIDS ASSOCIATION

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