

## **Key principles for minimising stigmatising language: A thematic analysis of alcohol and other drug-related language guides**

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### **Introduction:**

Language is powerful, and its social and political effects can be enduring. There is an increasing awareness that these effects mediate alcohol and other drug stigma and harm. In response, a number of language guides have been developed in recent years by peer-led and other drug and alcohol organisations. Many of these guides have proposed 'guiding principles' for minimising stigmatising language. To date no research has reviewed language guides to establish the extent to which proposed guiding principles align and diverge.

### **Method:**

A review of language guides published in the last 5 years (n = 27) was conducted. Eleven documents were selected for analysis based on presence of guiding principles. A thematic analysis of guiding principles identified a set of five saturated themes present across the language guides.

### **Key Findings:**

Analysis shows that selected language guides largely align in their guidance, with minimal divergence. Five key principles to reduce stigmatising language were identified: 1) People should be framed as people, not in relation to their substance use or diagnoses where possible; 2) Person-first language is preferred where a substance use or other framing is required; 3) The context of language use, including who is using the language, is critical in defining which words are most appropriate; 4) Jargon and slang should be minimised; 5) Empowering and strengths-based language should be used where possible.

### **Discussions and Conclusions:**

Language is dynamic, polyvalent, evolving and contingent and therefore requires contextual mindfulness and that people who use alcohol and other drugs be consulted. Findings highlight that a person-first approach does not simply mean adding "person who" as a prefix to a drug use category and demands we evaluate whether a framing in relation to substance use (or other categories) is necessary.

### **Implications for Practice or Policy:**

Minimising stigma in communication requires people in all alcohol and other drug settings (policy, research, education, community, treatment etc.) take action: being mindful in use of language, educating others, intervening to reduce stigma and harm.

### **Disclosure of Interest Statement:**

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.