

Identification and management of possible alcohol use disorders among patients entering custody in New South Wales

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Introduction: Australian state and national surveys of the prison population indicate at least one fifth had consumed alcohol (before incarceration) at levels for which a health intervention is recommended. However, surveys can be conducted well after the time of imprisonment, and do not inform immediate clinical care. For the first time in an Australian state, we analysed routinely collected clinical data on alcohol consumption and related health concerns for people entering publicly managed custodial reception centers.

Method: Custodial intake health screening data were extracted from all (n=15,179) patients of the Justice Health and Forensic Mental Health Network during 2018. Descriptive analysis was used for demographics, chi² tests for differences in alcohol consumption patterns between urban vs regional/remote custodial facilities, and bi-variate and multivariate analysis to investigate associations of alcohol consumption with other drug use.

Key Findings: A larger proportion of patients in urban facilities reported daily or almost daily alcohol consumption compared with regional/remote. There is extensive polydrug use among regular alcohol consumers.

Discussions and Conclusions: Many patients may withdraw from one or more other drugs when entering custodial facilities. While patients may underreport substance use, it appears that a larger proportion of people are likely to withdraw from alcohol in urban facilities than in regional/remote.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Clinical services within prisons need to be ready to respond to complex substance use and other comorbidities, in the context of a growing prison population. A larger proportion of patients in urban prisons may need alcohol withdrawal support than regional/remote.

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