

Solving New Zealand's drug and alcohol addiction treatment problem

November 2017

Dapaanz is heartened that the 2017 Coalition Government not only accepts that addiction is a serious problem, but also that improving treatment options for New Zealanders is more effective than enforcement-focused approaches.

Dapaanz looks forward to partnering with the new Government to develop workable solutions that will bring our drug policy in line with many other countries that are reducing the impacts of addiction for individuals and communities. As the peak addiction sector body, we have the required knowledge and expertise to help.

In New Zealand the cost of addiction to society is estimated at \$1.8 billion annually yet we spend around \$150 million each year on treatment. That makes little sense and Dapaanz contends that spending a little more to increase addiction treatment will save much more in health, social and justice costs.



One of the biggest problems is a dis-incentivised workforce

The problem is that increasing treatment options and making them more widely available cannot work without increasing the qualified and highly-skilled practitioner workforce –and under current conditions it is a workforce that will be difficult to grow.

Starting salaries for addiction practitioners can be well below \$40,000 and even qualified and experienced practitioners earn significantly less than their professional peers in the health and other sectors. Also, practitioners working in NGOs doing the same or similar work earn 10-20 percent less than their counterparts working in DHBs.

Dapaanz believes addressing these two key areas of pay inequity – much as it has recently for caregivers – is one of the key things the Government can do to increase the addiction workforce and therefore access to treatment – and to ensure a better future for New Zealand through reduced harm from addiction.

Addiction practitioners must be valued more highly

This is about professionalisation. Addiction practitioners have a minimum of an applied bachelor degree. They do extremely valuable and important work with the potential to have a more positive impact than any other sector for individuals and families, and across communities.

The work of treatment practitioners:

- has a dramatic impact on the wellbeing of communities
- helps turn antisocial behaviour into prosocial behaviour
- makes an incredible difference in the lives of people with addiction and their families
- reduces health and welfare costs, and the need for prison beds
- reduces crime and its impacts on communities.

And we expect them to do all this for very poor wages. Meanwhile, the impacts of drugs like methamphetamine and synthetic cannabinoids mean practitioners are increasingly faced with clients who have high and complex needs including psychosis. Workloads are also burgeoning in work environments that are becoming more and more fraught and complex.

These problems are only going to get worse, and if it weren't for the dedication and compassion of our current addiction practitioners, no one would be doing this work. It is simply wrong that we continue to rely on our current practitioners' sacrificial goodwill.

Solutions are not difficult or radical

There is a big pool of potential addiction practitioners we could draw on – and with little fuss. People can become registered as fully competent addiction practitioners and get a job in an addiction service if they are qualified in one of the allied professions (e.g. nursing, counselling and/or social work, etc) and then gain a Level 7 addiction-specific qualification.

Attracting just 100 people from the allied workforce would change the face of addiction treatment in New Zealand. Therefore, Dapaanz sees great benefit in the Government re-allocating some funding to support allied workers wanting to move to the addiction sector.

It's working overseas

New Zealand could learn from other countries where the approach to crime and drug-related offending has become focused on rehabilitation and treatment rather than prison and punishment.

- In the Netherlands more than 20 prisons have been shut down in the last few years because treatment-focused penal reforms have drastically reduced prisoner numbers.
- Portugal is experiencing substantial declines in addiction and resulting crime because more people are now receiving treatment instead of being locked up.

We can do the same thing here, but we first need to focus on attracting and retaining good people to the workforce.

We need to increase our range of treatment options

It is crucial to increase and retain the workforce, so we can increase the range of treatment options because one size does not fit all and individuals experiencing addiction respond to different treatment approaches. Having more qualified addiction practitioners would also reduce waiting lists so that treatment providers respond more quickly to people in need, so people's problems do not escalate.

- Resources must be increased towards early identification/intervention and treatment.
- People should be assessed for addiction as appropriate at social services, doctors' surgeries or wherever they go for help – before things worsen and they need residential treatment.
- Increased availability of services would make it easier for people to get help early before they resort to crime.
- Waiting list times must be eliminated so people receive help when they ask for it. When they have to wait months for treatment they often return to active substance use.
- Currently a person with a methamphetamine addiction could wait four months before being admitted to a residential programme.

About Dapaanz

Dapaanz is the member association representing the professional interests of people working in the addiction treatment sector and has more than 1600 members. We:

- exist to support our members
- foster and maintain ethical and competent addiction practice
- manage endorsement and registration processes
- promote professional development
- advocate for the workforce and people affected by addictions.

Find out more at www.dapaanz.org.nz.

Executive Director: Sue Paton – 04 282 1809, 021 187 4311, sue@dapaanz.org.nz.

