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For non-Indigenous workers

Drug prevention work with Indigenous Australian clients and communities

How to ensure your services are culturally appropriate and sensitive

Introduction

Many people would agree that effective drug prevention in Indigenous Australian communities needs more than a strictly health approach or focus. They acknowledge the desire of Indigenous Australians to be recognised as whole persons whose physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual needs are interlinked, and advise workers, services and agencies to take an holistic approach when working with Indigenous Australian clients and communities.

However, many workers in "mainstream" services and organisations are confused about exactly what this means for them and the services they provide. What is expected of the worker when an Indigenous Australian client walks through the door? Are you expected to examine every aspect of the person's life, including those that may be embarrassingly personal (if not an infringement of privacy)? This fact sheet offers a brief exploration of some cultural issues you might take into account when working with Indigenous Australian clients and communities.

What are the most important aspects of Indigenous Australians' wellbeing?

Connection to land

Indigenous Australians have a special connection to the land, both generally and to their specific "country". Unlike non-Indigenous Australians whose relationship to land is often one of ownership or usefulness, Indigenous Australians believe that they belong to the land. This belonging carries with it certain benefits and responsibilities, as well as rites and ceremonies.

Kinship, family and community

Indigenous Australians emphasise family and social relationships as important aspects of health and well-

being. As with their connection to land, Indigenous people often have reciprocal rights, obligations and responsibilities to family and community.

Spirit

Indigenous Australians consider their land and kinship connections to be of central spiritual importance. Spirituality includes connection to spiritual ancestors and spiritual places.

Wellbeing

For Indigenous Australians, wellbeing is a complex concept involving both the individual and her/his community. Mind, body and spirit are linked in illness, healing and health, and thus wellbeing incorporates physical, social, emotional, cultural and spiritual "health", and is interlinked with Indigenous Australians' spiritual, kinship and cultural connections to the land.

What does it mean to take an holistic approach to drug prevention in Indigenous communities?

Understanding health

The National Drug Strategy (Ministerial Council on Drugs Strategy 2003) defines holistic health as being:

"A comprehensive view of health, regarded as not only individual physical wellness, but also the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of a whole community. In order to achieve whole-of-life, culturally appropriate and relevant health outcomes in prevention, treatment, and continuing care, holistic health care may include traditional cultural practices alongside curative or treatment services."

Understanding community

Simply put, an holistic approach means considering the whole person and the whole community. In a general sense, this involves understanding:

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- Indigenous Australians' historical experiences of colonisation, dispossession and disempowerment
- The legacy of emotional and social problems left by experiences such as government removal of children from families
- The high levels of social disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians
- The fact that Indigenous Australians have largely been subjects, rather than participants, in many drug prevention programs and initiatives.

You also need specific knowledge about the particular community in which you are working, including:

- How the community works—its kinship relationships, elders and cultural focuses
- The community's experience of alcohol and other drug use, including trends and patterns
- Attitudes and perceptions of alcohol and other drug use
- The community's awareness, motivation and involvement with prevention strategies.

How can I ensure my services are culturally appropriate and sensitive to the needs of Indigenous Australians?

1. Take a longer-term approach, rather than expect immediate results.
2. Base your practice on the best available evidence.
3. Ensure that the service approach demonstrates awareness of the historical, cultural and social contexts of the Indigenous community.
4. Recognise the role of traditional healing and its importance to Indigenous Australians where it is culturally accepted and requested.
5. Be aware of the importance of immediate and extended family members and, with the client's permission, include them wherever possible.
6. However, be protective of your clients' right to privacy. Not all Indigenous Australians want to have their family or community involved if they are seeking assistance with a drug problem, so they may prefer to use "mainstream" services in order to protect their privacy.
7. If you are collecting data about your clients for a service evaluation and/or report, obtain their consent as well as approval from the community.
8. Where possible (and with client permission), engage a local cultural consultant to help ensure

that your services are culturally appropriate for the local area and/or language groups. You may need advice on community protocols, family connections and kinship groups.

9. Work in partnership with the community—recognise that Indigenous Australians are best placed to determine their own, localised solutions.
10. Develop meaningful relationships that encourage respect, trust and confidence.
11. When communicating health messages remember that culturally conditioned beliefs, values, knowledge, attitudes, practices and communication patterns can affect health-related behaviour.
12. When communicating health messages, be aware of your audience and its needs. Some people may not have had the opportunity to learn to read and write, so you will need to keep your message simple and avoid jargon. On the other hand, many Indigenous Australians are highly literate and accomplished, so avoid stereotyping.
13. Encourage community members to participate in discussion about drugs and drug prevention, and to come up with their own solutions.
14. Try to provide a relaxed environment that is non-threatening, friendly and culturally sensitive.

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