

A letter to a friend

Professor David Clark describes his thoughts about his change of career to an old neuroscience friend in America

Hi Buddy,

I remember our times together in the neuroscience field very fondly. It was great!

However, as you know, the time came when I felt I was not doing what I wanted to do – help people. Despite what I had achieved, and the great talk I could give on addiction and the brain, I felt that my work – and that of most other neuroscientists – was not actually helping people overcome substance use problems.

I certainly made the right decision to leave neuroscience! I'm now in a fascinating field and I know that I am doing something that will contribute to helping people, albeit indirectly.

Given that the field crosses the boundaries of so many disciplines and sectors in society, I am meeting a diverse range of people and I am involved in a wide range of issues. I am also learning so much.

I love meeting people who have recovered or are recovering from addiction. How some of them have overcome the difficulties they have faced is beyond me. There have shown so much bravery and I am sometimes left in awe.

The field can also be very frustrating, because of the politics and other rubbish that goes on. One thing that annoys me is the stigmatisation and stereotyping of people with substance use problems and their families. This exists at all levels of society, including among practitioners and commissioners who are supposed to be helping people get better.

One annoying thing was going to a service user conference and hearing the Head of the National Treatment Agency say, 'Because you are seen as a threat, the government is prepared to spend money on drug treatment'.

It seems that the poor health and social welfare of people with substance use problems are not a sufficient priority – it is the crime committed by a small proportion that matters. This attitude is confirmed by the fact that the treatment system is embedded in the criminal justice sector, not in the health or social welfare sectors.

Great message for some of society's most damaged individuals and families: a big door with a sign saying, 'Enter here. Get treatment, so society can be protected.'

Research shows that a key element of recovery is being accepted as 'normal' by a so-called 'normal' society. Society with its prejudice is shooting itself in the foot in relation to helping people overcome



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substance use problems.

So what do I do with my time? Well, it's different to our days together, in that I don't devote as much time to conducting original research.

The best way that I can describe what I do, is that I try to get the most relevant and important information to the right people. Most of this information is already out there in one form or other, or could be accessed if we did things differently.

The information helps practitioners and commissioners do their job better, and people with substance use problems better understand how they can overcome their problems. One important strand of our work is to develop multimedia training,

education and self-help guides.

So where do I get this knowledge and information from? Some comes from scientific research – a lot of the top science generally gets as far as specialist journals, but no further.

One vast, but relatively untapped source of information, is the people who are recovering/recovered from serious substance use problems. Their views and experiences are invaluable.

However, this field has historically spent most of its time and money focusing on the problem (addiction) rather than the solution (recovery). It has spent little time trying to understand how millions of people have found recovery.

My team are trying to change that, and also help recovered/recovering people join together to form recovery communities and help others overcome serious substance use problems.

Your country is leading the way in this regard – we are way behind. It's strange that after so many years of original thinking and experimental work in my own laboratory, that I am now using the expertise and advances of others to bring about much-needed change.

Our government-led treatment system is rather naïve in various other ways – it focuses on the 'drug' problem, rather than 'the drug, person and social context'. It thinks that teaching people about drugs will stop them using, when in fact we need to be teaching people about how to change behaviour.

You're probably saying that I must be in my element, teaching people about things that help people get better. Well, yes and no. I will be in my element when I can get my material to the right people.

But it is a challenge getting there. One of the frustrations is that the field spends very little money training practitioners and commissioners. Another is that there is a resistance to change amongst many people in this field, and a desire to control the agenda from the top. We are trying to bring about significant change, and give more control to the people and to communities.

Ultimately, our organisation Wired In aims to provide an environment of opportunity, choice and hope for people, enabling individuals and families to find recovery.

Take care,

David (www.davidclarkwired.blogspot.com)