

FDAP looks at what's working – and what's not

Plenary speakers at FDAP's fifth annual drug and alcohol professionals' conference gave their views on what's important for the substance misuse field and its future strategy.

We need commitment and consistency from the top

Martin Barnes believed the government's radical review of the drug strategy, forecast for January, was now more likely to emerge in February or March. The DrugScope chief executive said there would be 'a lot to say about the way forward' and expected some tough decisions on future spending.

But it was important to acknowledge the many achievements of the drugs field in the face of the media's increasing readiness to portray drug treatment as ineffective. Simplistic exaggerated headlines should not be allowed to detract from sustained funding, he said. Young people's services and DIP had already suffered cuts, and insufficient funding was overwhelming the prison service.

'We need clear sustained commitment, leadership and consistency from the top,' said Mr Barnes. 'How else can we expect it from local funders and providers?' Shadow Home Secretary David Davis's call for an inquiry into failed expenditure on drug treatment, and the accompanying headlines, took no account of the fact that tens of thousands of people's lives were being improved, he said. The cold political reality was that crime had been the catalyst for the greater spend on treatment, and not compassion for drug users, said Mr Barnes.

There was still confusion over what successful treatment meant, and Mr Barnes warned against putting hard targets, such as retaining clients in treatment for 12 weeks, above clients' actual needs: 'People are concerned about the "Tesco-isation" of treatment – if you tick the right boxes and fax the right forms, it doesn't matter about the client.' It was crucial to achieve improvements that allowed flexibility, he said: 'Choice, dignity and the right to challenge without fear should be the right of every service user.'

These rights should be accompanied by effective aftercare through help with housing, training and employment – which were 'so fundamental they should not be called wraparound services but core services,' said Mr Barnes.

Don't let budget cuts undermine progress and competence

FDAP's chief executive, Simon Shepherd, looked back over ten years of working in the substance misuse field and listed markers of progress: the NTA had been set up accompanied by a massive increase in budget; twice as many people had been directed into treatment; waiting lists had been slashed; there was a better trained and skilled workforce; and more understanding now between different parts of the field, particularly abstinence and harm reduction.

But, he added, news had not all been good. There were still too many problems in accessing residential treatment, and there were too many instances of agencies struggling and having to shut. Despite the progress with professional competence, Mr Shepherd was worried that the end of NTA targets in 2008 would mean that staff training would lose out at a time when it was badly needed. 'Everyone in a frontline role must have adequate supervision,' he emphasised.

The 'ludicrous and discriminatory' two-year rule, the scandal of GPs' under-prescribing, inappropriate use of incentives (as mentioned in Mark Easton's *Today Programme* report) and big gaps in regulation were mentioned as unacceptable by Mr Shepherd, who highlighted 'actively dangerous' alternative therapies (as mentioned in recent *DDN* letters pages). 'We don't want to stifle innovation, but when we know of something dangerous, we shouldn't allow it to go on,' he said.

A key question was: despite having more money, were we using it effectively? Are the right people being referred to the right services?. TOPS would help, but not give us all the answers, said Mr Shepherd; we needed to have more confidence that outcomes could be properly quantified, so we could 'prove to government that present funding is being spent wisely, in order to retain funding'.

'There's a lot done, but still a lot to do,' he concluded. 'Workers need to be proud – but it's our job to ensure that you have the resources to take the sector forward over the next ten years.'

Alcohol Concern tackles the 'too much, too young' culture

Alcohol Concern's conference 'Too much too young? Alcohol and young people' looked at changing a culture that encourages young people to form an early and dangerous relationship with alcohol.

'Gold standard' must be the norm for drinks industry

'Gold standard' practices relating to alcohol marketing and advertising must become the norm – not the exception – in the drinks industry, Alcohol Concern chief executive Srabani Sen told delegates.

'Alcohol is not a product like other products,' she said. 'It is potentially – if mishandled – a dangerous product, which is why we want to see gold standards adopted as the norm. There are examples of really good practice in the drinks industry and we want to see wider uptake of these.' The drinks industry needed to look closely at the unintended consequences of poor practice, she said, such as bonuses for bar staff based on how

much alcohol they sold.

It was also essential that there was independent scrutiny, rather than self-regulation, of the drinks industry. 'There are a number of self-regulatory codes – some are good, some are not,' she said. 'But even if they're good there's no independent monitoring of them, and when codes are breached there are few consequences.'

The conference saw the publication of two reports, *Time gentlemen please* which pulls together the themes of Alcohol Concern's 'Raising the bar' campaign, calling for a ban on pre-watershed alcohol advertising on TV, proactive monitoring of self-regulation and the

reduction of underage sales to zero, and *Cheap at twice the price* which looks at children's buying power of alcohol. This report found that children's pocket money had increased by 200 per cent over the last 20 years, and that it cost less than an average week's pocket money to buy four times the recommended adult limit of alcohol in some supermarkets.

She also called for an increase in tax on alcohol to cut harmful levels of drinking among young people, and urged people to complain if they came across examples of irresponsible advertising and marketing. 'Trade bodies need to know if their members are breaching their own codes,' she said.

Help people out of treatment as early as possible

The drugs field needs to make its successes more visible, Paul Hayes told the conference. 'We do have a good story – but it's hard to believe, listening to the media,' the NTA chief executive said, referring to the fallout from the recent *Today Programme* interview, which claimed wholesale failure of the drug treatment system.

We now had two-thirds of problem drug users in treatment, and were successfully managing them, said Mr Hayes. Demonstrating a big impact on 180,000 people's health, as well as on society, was an important result that was being overlooked, he said.

A clear objective was to make sure as many people as possible were helped out of treatment as early as possible. 'If we don't, we will find the

treatment system is unsustainable,' he said. 'If not enough people come out the back door, there will not be enough room at the front door.'

Clinical guidelines were giving a clear steer to prescribers and the TOP [Treatment Outcomes Profile] was ensuring treatment journeys could be fully addressed, said Mr Hayes. As well as ensuring value for money, the NTA's priorities included making sure that the right workers and managers were recruited and retained, that they were competent and motivated, and that they 'had the right skills and tools to deliver'.

Maintaining standards was the collective responsibility of not just the NTA, but also treatment providers, the NHS and commissioners, said Mr Hayes.

Treatment must focus on person not system

We need to stop over-promising on treatment and focus on the person and their recovery, said Professor David Clark, director of Wired. This meant focusing on their health and wellbeing instead of looking at drug problems as a criminal justice issue.

There were so many people being missed out of treatment, he pointed out, including those not involved in the criminal justice system, problem drinkers, those addicted to prescription drugs and family members who were deeply affected by their relative's substance use.

It was no surprise that the BBC looked upon the drug treatment system as a failure, Prof Clark commented. 'We are open to criticism that we are not helping people get better,' he said. Too few people were leaving treatment drug-free and many commissioners and practitioners did

not understand what getting people better meant. While methadone maintenance had its place, substitute prescribing was all too often robbing clients of the ambition of becoming drug-free. The NTA was 'caught between a rock and a hard place', justifying a system that was dominated by paperwork and hampered by decisions that were made with only superficial understanding. Despite many talented practitioners, it was vital to change focus from the drug to the person, Prof Clark emphasised.

Lasting change depended on drug users committing to a long-term plan of action. 'We need to be innovative and we need to empower the system,' said Prof Clark, explaining that this meant using a network of all possible resources, from treatment and support groups to loved ones, society and others in recovery.

We can, and will, take on the drinks industry

The tide is turning in our direction... there's a shifting culture around drinking, said Alcohol Concern chief executive Srabani Sen.

Alcohol Concern had seen a massive improvement through the recent emphasis on tackling health-related harm – which related not just to binge drinking but to behaviour across all age ranges, and signified less marginalising of problem drinking.

At the beginning of her three years in post, Ms Sen had been told 'you can never take on the drinks industry'. The 'massive move forward', including public service agreements (PSAs) on alcohol, meant this was now not the case, she believed.

While it was too soon to measure their effects, there were strong initiatives to tackle alcohol and promotions, and the Alcohol Health Alliance – of which AC was a member, alongside 23 other medical organisations and charities – had been officially launched on the day of the conference. The Alliance had already encountered pre-launch opposition from drinks industry bodies, 'which shows how scared they are' said Ms Sen.

The 'vast scramble for funds' would continue, she said, 'as we don't have the luxury of the pooled treatment budget'. With many more problem drinkers than drug users, it was inevitable that the alcohol sector would continue to scramble for survival.

Help the right decisions

Guidance to parents on the risks associated with young people drinking is to be published next year, parliamentary under-secretary of state for children, young people and families Kevin Brennan told Alcohol Concern delegates.

An expert panel of paediatricians, child psychologists and others would review the evidence that will form the basis of the guidance, he announced. Alcohol was a difficult problem for any government, he acknowledged. 'The good news is that fewer young people are drinking – but the ones who are, are drinking more.' It was important to help young people make the right decisions at the same time as having the opportunity to grow, develop and enjoy themselves. 'It has to be acceptable for young people to say "I don't want to drink", for parents to say "you're too young" and for shop and bar staff to refuse to serve them without ID. All of this requires a culture change.'

The government's national alcohol strategy *Safe, sensible, social* had identified under 18s as a priority group for the first time, he said, and young people with alcohol misuse problems would receive help through the NTA. This would now be woven into the government's spending plans through a public service agreement (PSA), he pledged. 'The real measure of success, however, will be when it's normal or even cool not to drink before you're 18.'

Two distinct drinking cultures developing

Two distinct cultures were emerging around young people and alcohol, said co-ordinator at the Drug Education Forum, Andrew Brown.

The majority of young people do not drink, he said, with the number who had never had a drink now higher than it used to be. The minority that did, however, were drinking more, and at a younger age. 'We've got two cultures developing and solidifying, with neither being served particularly well by the way we talk about – and teach around – alcohol.'

Not enough was known about the effect education had on young people's attitudes to alcohol, he said. Alcohol education needed to be given more weight in the school curriculum, and teachers were often unconfident about teaching around alcohol in case they were confronted about their own drinking. Similarly, parents could be unsure about how to start conversations about alcohol for fear it would lead to confrontation, and some parents who had their own problems with alcohol were not

setting appropriate limits.

Education remained too knowledge-focused, as was the case in public information campaigns. 'Education is not information,' he said. 'Young people know about alcohol. We need to teach them attitudes and skills – pro-health attitudes and the skills not to go along with peer pressure.' Most alcohol education felt unconnected from young people's lives, and the tone was failing many: 'Shock tactics work with kids who aren't doing it – they don't work with young people who are already engaging with it, and in some cases they can make them more likely to do those things.' Mixed messages were also being sent about what constitutes 'binge drinking', he said.

It was essential to invest in research so there was evidence to work from, as schools were not told what was effective. The status of alcohol and drug education also had to be improved, he said. 'It should be a mandatory subject, but even this is not a magic bullet.'