

## **The Western Australian Methamphetamine Forum**

### *From Research to Practice*

### Summary

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**The Western Australian Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies (WANADA) and the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) co-hosted a Methamphetamine Forum on 22 October 2015 to support WA workers in the alcohol and other drug and related sectors.**

The forum was held to provide support, raise awareness and assist to build participants confidence and knowledge in managing methamphetamine related presentations.

The intention for the participants that attended the forum was to:

- Learn about patterns and trends of methamphetamine use
- Learn about best practice treatment and intervention options
- Have the opportunity to discuss the current gaps in the AOD treatment sector

The forum brought together renowned methamphetamine experts from across Australia to highlight and examine evidence based strategies which can be used to identify methamphetamine-related problems early on, respond to them effectively, and improve treatment efficacy and outcomes.

The forum was attended by over 130 participants from a wide variety of alcohol and other drug and mental health professions, including frontline health (doctors, nurses, counsellors) and community workers, police and policy makers.

The feedback from the forum was extremely positive about the variety of speakers, evidence-based content, and the relevance of the forum to their work environments.

Participants commented favourably on the diversity of information and the organisation of the Forum. Presentations by Associate Professor Nicole Lee, Professor Amanda Baker and Paul Dessauer were reported to be especially valuable, and increased participants' knowledge about the physiological and psychological impact of methamphetamine, treatment efficacy and the options available for frontline professionals.

### **Professor Ann Roche**

Professor Ann Roche, Director of NCETA, opened the Forum with an overview of current patterns and trends of methamphetamine use in Australia and its implications for the health and community sectors. Recent analyses, undertaken by NCETA, of the 2013 National Drug Strategy Household Survey show that while the proportion of Australians who have used methamphetamine in the past 12 months has remained relatively stable since 2007, the proportion of weekly users had significantly increased from 2010 to 2013. Frequent use increases the risk of harm and dependence and treatment demand had increased 4-fold. A significant shift to smoking as the preferred mode of administration, greater purity, and low price were also noted as potential contributors to increased harm.

### **Maree Stallard**

Maree Stallard from WANADA presented the results of the Methamphetamine Use: Consumer Snapshot Survey, collected from 19 AOD services in Western Australia in August 2015. Results showed that 74% of clients that completed the survey had used methamphetamine in their lifetime. More than half of clients presenting to AOD services who had used methamphetamine had used this drug for 5 years or longer. The majority of clients using methamphetamine were using alone and indicated that methamphetamine was not their primary drug of choice.

### **Professor Amanda Baker**

Methamphetamine use is associated with numerous physiological and psychological problems, including toxicity, cardiovascular and cerebrovascular complications, anxiety, depression, polydrug abuse, dependence, violent behaviours, cognitive deficits, and psychosis. Professor Amanda Baker, Senior Research Fellow at NHMRC, examined these issues in detail to inform effective public health responses and focused on a healthy lifestyle approach to problem prevention.

### **Associate Professor Nicole Lee**

Associate Professor Nicole Lee, a practicing psychologist with 25 years' experience in the AOD sector, examined what works in treatment and reinforced that what AOD practitioners already do in their respective treatment settings is appropriate to address methamphetamine issues. Compared to alcohol and heroin withdrawal, acute methamphetamine withdrawal can be protracted. This has important implications for the provision of treatment. To date relapse prevention (cognitive behaviour therapy) and motivational interviewing show most evidence of effectiveness. Suggested practical strategies for frontline workers included flexible, shorter and more frequent appointments, memory aids and assertive follow-up.

### **Dr Amanda Stafford**

Dr Amanda Stafford, Royal Perth Hospital Emergency Medicine Consultant, spoke of the challenges they encounter and provided an insight into methamphetamine use from a clinical perspective. Dr Stafford also spoke of her upcoming research plans to study baclofen treatment for problematic methamphetamine use, using an old medication for a new problem.

### **Paul Dessauer**

Paul Dessauer from the Western Australian Substance Users Association provided a consumer/peer perspective on the issue from a harm reduction point of view. He provided an insight into the current "epidemic" created by media attention, as well as information on current

trends and manufacturing. He addressed what he believes isn't currently working in the Western Australian AOD sector and discussed what might work in the future, which included well-designed prevention campaigns, diversion to treatment and long-term residential rehabilitation with appropriate follow-up and support.

### **Sandra Harris**

Sandra Harris, Clinical Coordinator for Palmerston Association, spoke about the impact that problematic drug use can have on families and the support that is available. Sandra spoke alongside a volunteer who shared her personal story of how Palmerston provided her with support through her child's drug issues and the impact that drug use can have on families.

### **Detective Superintendent James Migro**

Detective Superintendent James Migro from the WA Police Service spoke of the challenges they encounter. Recent Western Australian statistics were presented including those regarding amphetamine arrests, seizures, purity as well as the impact of 'meth houses' in suburbia. He spoke briefly of the National Drug Strategy and the WA Police Enforcement Plan targeting the supply of methamphetamine in Western Australia.

The information sharing session facilitated by Professor Ann Roche explored the following topics:

- What we are currently doing well in regards to methamphetamine treatment in Western Australia
- What the gaps in the treatment sector are in regards to managing methamphetamine related presentations
- What we can do better in regards to methamphetamine treatment

A number of key themes emerged from the feedback that revealed the strengths and current gaps in the Western Australian AOD sector.

Forum participants recognised the positive shift towards family inclusive practice, however identified this as an area that still requires further attention to increase family support in the sector. Even though the evidence supporting the benefits of family inclusive practice is overwhelming, there is research (Gruenert & Tsantefski, 2012, Ibanga et al, 2008) that there is still a prevailing focus on the individual rather than the family unit in the AOD sector, and it has been slow to adopt therapeutic approaches that include family members.

The effectiveness of peer led services was recognised at the forum with many comments directed toward the need for additional peer based and peer driven approaches. It was also recognised that stronger collaboration between services as well as between the AOD and mental health sectors is needed into the future for better consumer outcomes. This includes establishing clearer referral pathways between services and better connections between hospitals and AOD treatment services.

The diversity of treatment services and the accessibility to free programs in the Western Australian AOD sector was commended as well as the sector's ability to flexibly respond to arising issues. Yet it was noted that the sector's current treatment and support system is not particularly well designed to respond to emerging issues such as methamphetamine use.

Many services are designed for other types of drugs, for example, some services lack appropriate follow-up for the extended withdrawal period associated with methamphetamine. Gaps were identified in post-treatment support and aftercare and the need for specific programs for methamphetamine users was also identified. Other gaps that were noted were the extensive waitlists of many services and the lack of funding for AOD services.

Workforce training and development was identified as a strength of the sector however it was noted that more specific AOD training for mental health service workers, police and General Practitioners is required into the future.

In summary, the forum noted areas where patterns of use had changed, the risks associated with use, and the importance of understanding the physiological and psychological changes involved and ensuring that treatment and other responses reflected this knowledge. Emphasis was placed on the importance of early intervention strategies and the need for service redesign to accommodate longer term treatment and significant treatment demand.

Speaker presentations can be downloaded from the WANADA website:

<http://www.wanada.org.au/Home/methamphetamine-forum-presentations.html>. Visit the WANADA website: <http://www.wanada.org.au> for more information.