

AOD@theGP: reducing harm, increasing support

In 2017, Eastern Melbourne PHN (Primary Health Network) collaborated with Caraniche to design and develop a new AOD service – one that supports GPs and other health professionals to help patients with alcohol and other drug use.

Designed and delivered by Caraniche to assist GPs, AOD@theGP connects patients with AOD clinicians, providing non-judgemental, health-focused care around the impact of substance use. Based on an early intervention, evidence-based model, the innovative service aims to reduce the wider effects of alcohol and drug use.

The service recognises that GPs are uniquely placed to identify patients whose substance use is at risk of becoming unhealthy, but are often under-resourced and lacking time to address this with patients. AOD@theGP supports GPs in engaging at-risk patients and offers a pathway beyond the GP's consultation room.

Commissioned by Eastern Melbourne PHN (EMPHN), AOD@theGP also represents a successful partnership between Caraniche and the primary health sector.

EMPHN CEO, Robin Whyte, said basing the AOD clinicians at general practices provides a more holistic approach to health care for patients, bringing physical, mental, and drug and alcohol treatment together in one location.

"AOD@theGP aims to respond to research demonstrating people with alcohol and other drug problems are less likely to receive

appropriate care than people with other health problems such as mental illness, smoking or chronic disease," she said.

For many patients, being able to explore the impact of substance use can open up a chance to discuss strategies for change. The service provides an experienced AOD clinician – a Recovery Support Worker – onsite at the GP clinic to provide on-the-spot assessments, information, resources, and facilitate access to community-based AOD services.

"Research has found that screening, brief intervention and referral to treatment to manage substance abuse has many health benefits for the individual," says Sally Thorpe, Manager of Community Counselling Services at Caraniche, who oversees the initiative.

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The service also supports patients who are concerned about a family member's substance use. Through AOD@theGP, family members can access a Recovery Support Worker along with resources and strategies to support young people, partners and relatives whose substance use may be impacting their own lives.

As specialists in the AOD field, AOD@theGP works with GPs to develop plans for gradual substance use reduction, suggest pharmacotherapy, refer people for counselling, support referrals to pain management services and explore other treatment options.

A secondary consultation service is provided so GPs can discuss the best treatment options for their patient with an AOD clinician; and, a phone service is available for GPs and other health professionals who work across EMPHN's catchment. This provides information and support including urgent assessment and appointments for patients in crisis.

Practice nurses, pharmacists, medical receptionists and allied health providers working in the EMPHN area can also receive support through the email and 1800 number, and they can refer patients to AOD@theGP. Recovery Support Workers are on hand to help GPs and other health professionals address all kinds of substance use and associated health issues.

Following the success of this pilot program, Caraniche hopes to see AOD@theGP services become available in other Primary Health Networks.

What type of issues are addressed by AOD@theGP?

- Linking patients to pharmacotherapy
 - Smoking cessation
 - Liver health, Hepatitis C assessment and treatment referral
 - Alcohol consumption and harm reduction strategies
 - Pregnancy substance use and cessation
 - Overdose management
 - E-cigarettes and vapours
 - Synthetic substances
 - Codeine use and dependency
 - Safe injecting practices
 - Risks related to recreational drug use
 - Over the counter medication misuse
 - Illicit substances
 - Excessive caffeine consumption
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