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Sharing the care – drugs and GP support to promote alcohol withdrawal

Less than one per cent of alcohol dependent people in Australia are using Anti-craving medication that has been proven to be successful in helping alcohol dependent people stay off alcohol. Most people are unaware of their existence.

An innovative program involving alcohol dependent people, general practitioners (GPs) and specialist drug and alcohol services, is promoting wider use of the anti-craving drugs naltrexone and acamprosate as part of a shared response to alcohol withdrawal.

The two-year Shared Care Alcohol Project targets people who have been admitted to hospital or to a residential withdrawal centre. These patients are offered the anti-craving medications and, at the same time, contact is made with their GP to provide support when they leave hospital.

'This is a critical time for people, in which we should do what we can do give people the best chance of making long term changes in their life.' said Dr Nicholas Clark, Addiction Medicine Specialist and Research Fellow at Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre.

The project aims to increase the use of anti-craving medication and so improve the health and wellbeing of patients who go through alcohol detoxification and want to stay off alcohol.

A critical part of the project is providing GPs with access to timely specialist advice; information and training about alcohol dependence treatment; and case management assistance. By doing this, the project aims to develop the knowledge, skills and confidence of GPs in treating and advising patients who have an alcohol problem. The result should be a network of GPs and specialist agencies that are contributing to the effective management of alcohol dependence in the community.

'This method of involving GPs is unique in the alcohol and drug field,' said Dr Clark. *'It recognises the many demands on GPs and the range of issues they deal with everyday, and provides a choice of education and information opportunities.'*

Evaluating this project will also help to identify approaches that work well for GPs and patients and that could be replicated in the treatment of other dependence problems.

While still in its early stages, the project has established an outpatient service at Dandenong Hospital, which has begun to make contact with potential patients and with GPs.

The Shared Care Alcohol Project is funded through the Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation Ltd. It is being implemented in collaboration with GPs, Depaul House – a residential withdrawal facility, St Vincent's Hospital Melbourne, and specialist drug and alcohol agencies Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre and SouthCity Clinic GP services.

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