

Reviewing the Evidence For & Against Involuntary Treatment of Adults with Substance Use Disorders

Category: TED-Style Presentation

Abstract Body

The symposium will discuss findings from a narrative review on the use of involuntary treatment for adults with substance use disorders who are not involved in the criminal justice system and a systematic review conducted by the policy committee of involuntary treatment of persons with substance use disorders in general. The findings will promote discussion about the pros and cons of the potential use of involuntary treatment for persons with substance use disorders, differentiating between short-term use for further evaluation and treatment planning compared to withdrawal management alone or prolonged inpatient treatment, differences between those involved in the criminal justice system compared to those who are not.

Involuntary treatment for adults with substance use disorders (SUD) is controversial. Provincial governments are considering involuntary treatment for adults with SUD based on their morbidity and mortality and impacts on public safety and health care utilization. This symposium will discuss the findings of a recently done systematic review of involuntary treatment for SUD and a narrative review focusing on those adults not involved in the criminal justice system subject to civil commitment to discuss the potential pros and cons of involuntary treatment. The literature remains of poor quality, where evidence-based treatments are often unavailable. Despite deficits in the literature, people entering voluntary treatment generally do better overall than those admitted involuntarily. However, involuntarily admitted people tend to stay longer in residential treatment and complete residential treatment, especially if mandated by the criminal justice system. Some people who would not enter treatment unless on an involuntary basis also benefit, albeit less so than those voluntarily admitted. Unfortunately, benefits from involuntary treatment are often lost rapidly, and the risk of overdose can increase after.

Furthermore, it remains unclear from the literature which patients may benefit more from involuntary treatment than others. Thus, although the literature suggests some limited evidence for involuntary treatment for people with SUD, benefits appear less than that for those voluntarily treated. The use of involuntary treatment for SUD would likely require special legislation, the development of designated treatment sites, and extensive aftercare programming. Resources likely would be better directed towards expanding voluntary treatment options.

Key Words

- Ethical issues
- Legal Issues
- Policy
- Substance Use Disorder (general)

Learning Objective # 1

Discuss the pros and cons of involuntary treatment for adults with substance use disorders based on the evidence to date.

Learning Objective # 2

Recognize important deficits in the literature base on involuntary treatment for adults with substance use disorders.

Reference # 1

Cooley E, Bahji A, Crockford D. Involuntary Treatment for Adult Non-Offenders with Substance Use Disorders? Can J Addiction 2023, in press.

Reference # 2

Werb D, Kamarulzaman A, Meacham MC, Rafful C, Fischer B, Strathdee SA, et al. The effectiveness of compulsory drug treatment: A systematic review. Int J Drug Policy. 2016 Feb;28:1–9.

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