

Using Chaos Narratives to Improve Harm Reduction Care with Older People: a qualitative study of staff experience

Category: Poster Presentation (In-Person)

Abstract Body

Context: Working in harm reduction (HR) services is associated with high rates of staff turnover and burnout. Retaining and supporting staff is important to ensure efficient service delivery. This study is set in a permanent residential setting, “Harbour House” (HH, pseudonym) for older people with experience of homelessness, which provides a suite of HR services including managed alcohol and tobacco programs.

Objective: To understand staff experiences providing harm reduction services in this setting, with a view to developing supports.

Design: Qualitative interview study, thematic analysis informed by Frank’s1 typology of the chaos narrative. Member checking supported our interpretation.

Participants: All staff working in the setting were eligible to participate. 19 staff participated (3 family physicians; 2 nurses; 1 social worker; 8 personal support workers; 2 kitchen and housekeeping staff; 3 managers). 4 participants were interviewed twice. The final dataset consisted of 23 interviews (length 30- 90 minutes).

Findings: Providing HR in HH was stressful and a privilege. The concept of HR was broad, and staff prioritized ‘housing first’ fundamental; keeping residents off the streets was ‘a HR win’. Relational care was foundational and prioritized in day-to-day interactions allowing flexibility to shape HR delivery. Staff respected decisions made by residents, even if that went against staffs’ personal views. Deep listening and investing in relationships enabled staff to ‘voice’ residents’ unexpressed needs, including advocating with external agencies. Staff were subject to resident anger and experienced distress, witnessing behaviours which resulted in poor health &/or social outcomes for residents. Despite this, working with the residents was a source of inspiration, as staff honored longstanding adversity, resulting in a strong sense of accountability towards residents.

Conclusion: Using Frank’s chaos narrative as a lens to understand apparently unpredictable decisions and behaviours of people with extended histories of substance use affords opportunities to navigate successful delivery of HR, with benefits for both patients and those caring for them.

Key Words (Max 5)

- Equity, Diversity, Inclusion Issues
- Elderly Populations
- Occupational Health
- Prevention/Harm Reduction

Learning Objective #1

To describe the experiences of frontline staff working in harm reduction housing and care with older people with experiences of homelessness and addiction.

Learning Objective #2

To illustrate how Frank's illness narratives, especially chaos narratives, could inform wellness and training initiatives for staff working in harm reduction settings.

Reference #1

Frank, A. W. (2013). *The wounded storyteller: body, illness, and ethics* (Second edition.). The University of Chicago Press.

Reference #2

Frank, A. W. (1998). Just Listening: Narrative and Deep Illness. *Families Systems & Health*, 16(3), 197–212.
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