

'Addiction' is better than 'heavy use over time' for responding to alcohol problems in primary care

Nick Heather PhD,

Presentation at INEBRIA Thematic Meeting,
'Rethinking Alcohol Interventions in Health Care',
Stockholm, 27 May 2016

'Heavy use over time' or 'addiction'

- Rehm and colleagues (2013) argued that substance use disorders should be defined as 'heavy use over time'
- And concepts of 'dependence' or 'addiction' were unnecessary to a useful definition of substance use disorders
- What this misses is that people sometimes persist in behaving in ways they know are bad for them, i.e., they are 'addicted' to a certain form of behaviour (Heather, 2013)
- The problem patients face is not merely heavy use but addiction to heavy use

What 'heavy use over time' misses

- Some years ago one of the authors of the article under consideration very aptly described the problem of accounting for the 'glue' that holds a substance user to a repeated pattern of substance use (Room, 1973)
- “Substance use disorders reflect more than just substance use..... and notions such as “heavy use over time” are not fit for purpose” (Saunders, 2013)
- “Heavy use over time is a necessary condition of addictive disorders; however, in itself it is not a sufficient measure to assess addiction, neither in the case of internet use in general nor internet gaming disorder in particular” (Demetrovics & Kiraly, 2016)

DSM or ICD definitions of addiction/ dependence

- Part of the problem may be in comparing heavy use over time with all-or-none conceptions of substance use disorder/dependence/addiction, like DSM or ICD
- Rather, the comparison should be with conceptions of addiction that see it as lying on a continuum throughout the population of regular drinkers
- And rather than rely on a 'tick-box' approach to defining substance use disorders, we should try to isolate the essential nature of addictive behaviours

Better definitions of addiction

- Continuation of substance use (or activity) despite awareness of harm
- “A difficulty in refraining from a substance... accompanied by negative affect experienced in its absence” (Russell, 1976)
- “Repeated failures to refrain from drug use despite prior resolutions to do so” (Heather, 1998)
- See Heather, N. (forthcoming). On defining addiction. In: N. Heather & G. Segal (Eds.), *Addiction and Choice: Rethinking the Relationship*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press.



Stigma

- A reduction in stigma is one of the benefits claimed for the 'heavy use over time' definition
- But stigma, as an informal means of behavioural control, is applied to any behaviour that transgresses accepted norms and would continue to be applied to heavy use over time
- And stigma arises not merely from verbal labels attached to people but from the act of publicly marking them out for special attention and discrimination from the majority, for example by inviting people to attend for an appointment in a designated location for counselling or treatment in relation to an identified behavioural problem.

Implications for responding to addictive behaviour in primary health care

- There is no suggestion here that patients should be labelled as ‘addicts’
- Addictive behaviour in the primary care setting could be called ‘hard-to-reduce or –eliminate behaviors’ (Borland, R. [2014]. *Understanding Hard to Maintain Behaviour Change: A Dual Process Approach*. Chichester: John Wiley)
- And it could be conceptualised and taught as methods to help maintain health behaviour changes (Kwasnicka et al., 2016)