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Older adults and alcohol: A study of registered social workers' assessment practices

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Abstract

Difficulties resulting from alcohol use are a pervasive social issue across New Zealand, affecting people from all walks of life and ages. Registered social workers (RSWs) are ideally placed to breakdown taboos, support people to address difficulties arising from their use, and ultimately to improve our relationship with alcohol in New Zealand.

This thesis explores eight registered social workers' understanding of older adults' (OA) alcohol use and alcohol assessment processes. It is a qualitative study using a grounded theory method to interpret data gathered from semi-structure interviews.

The research initially focused on four core aims: a) whether participants asked OAs about their alcohol use, b) whether participants' perceptions of OAs affected assessment processes, c) whether participants had received any training in this area and d) whether agency assessment tools supported participants in assessment processes. A range of additional findings, extending these aims, were made and are included in the study's analysis. Some of the study's findings endorse current evidence, while some are surprising and sit outside of current literature.

Participants' practice was largely affected by 'perception based practice' possibly leading to negative assessment outcomes for OAs. In fact, alcohol was seen as outside the RSW scope of practice. It is recommended that education, training and supervision be used to develop an 'evidenced informed' model of practice; moving away from a single hypothesis to a multi-hypothesis approach and perception based to standardised questions. This would support an ability to challenge individual and system-wide perceptions, and intervention in-line with what is expected in Codes of Practice.

Recommendations are made for a range of agencies including: District Health Boards (DHBs), the Ministry of Health (MOH), Health Promotion Agency (HPA), Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB), and for the social work profession itself.

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