



Title: Northern Nurses' Perceptions of and Roles in Substance Use Related Harm Reduction

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Background

Canada is experiencing an ongoing and rapidly unfolding opioid crisis. Research demonstrates recent increases in substance use related hospitalizations, overdoses and mortality. Of particular significance are the physical (blood borne infections such as HIV and Hepatitis C) and social (mental health, stigma, and isolation) impacts of substance use. Harm reduction is a public health approach and philosophy of care with specific interventions to reduce the harms associated with substance use. Given nurses' close proximity and relational training, they are well positioned to incorporate harm reduction philosophy and interventions in their care of individuals impacted by substance use.

A literature review was conducted in order to uncover nurses' perceptions of and roles in harm reduction programs. Limited research was located specific to registered nurses, with many studies focussed on prescribers and other health care providers. Articles were incorporated if they included the nurses' voice. Themes of the literature review included: lack of enthusiasm/support for harm reduction, ethical considerations, burnout/unappreciation, and perceived roles. In addition, both system (lack of training, time, and information management) and individual (stigma, patient as barrier) level barriers were identified.

Research Gaps and Questions

The missing voice of nurses in Northern settings has prompted the following research questions: 1) What are the perceptions of Northern nurses working in substance use harm reduction programs? What are their perceived and actual roles? What barriers, facilitators and policies impact their practice?

Implications for Practice

Developing knowledge around nurses' perspectives and roles in harm reduction may provide opportunities to: 1) Better support nurses working in these settings, 2) Inform areas where harm reduction interventions are not as readily being carried out, 3) Inform future nursing curriculum development to better prepare students to incorporate harm reduction philosophy and interventions in their care.