

BEING RESEARCHED

And how to make the most of it

I ONCE WORKED as a teacher in a centre for 'disruptive' adolescents. Working with them was physically and emotionally taxing, but the rewards were immense. However, when anyone from outside expressed a research interest in what we were doing, we immediately became suspicious. Who were these people? What were their motives? Would their questioning be insensitive? Would their interviews have a deleterious effect upon emotionally fragile clients? Could we trust them to respect confidentiality? How much extra work would their requirements impose on us?

Underlying these initial reactions was an insecurity about the potential effect of the research upon established work practices and policies. Deeper than this ran the feeling that these people were at best interlopers and at worst parasites. So when I left teaching for research I was acutely aware of the reactions I was liable to face from drug agencies.

Many agencies welcome evaluation, realising its potential as an ally in presenting objective assessments of their work to interested parties such as funders and management committees. But difficulties can still arise in its practical implementation. It is the purpose of this short article to examine the relationship between the agency and the researcher and to show that the dynamics are not inherently oppositional.

Social research at drug agencies tends to fall into three categories: in-house research; routine monitoring; and face-to-face interviews. The potential for conflict between agency and research goals lies in the latter two categories.

Researchers wishing to collect client profile statistics from an agency may need to produce amended or additional forms to be completed, adding to the clerical workload and creating

Guidelines on the mutual etiquette of the relationship between researcher and drug agency. Like good manners everywhere, the aim is to avoid conflict getting in the way of communication.

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resentment among agency staff. Clearly what is needed is a unified system of routine monitoring that will standardise data collection, suit the requirements of researcher and agency alike, and lighten the burden of paperwork.

In the North West a monitoring system has been devised to achieve this very end. The simple and easily completed self-carboning single sheets can be used for Home Office notification of addiction as required. The widespread adoption of a system such as this would be valuable

The goodwill of agency workers is essential to the success of a research project

as a means of allowing a regional and nationwide database, and as a way of standardising a minimal dataset for drug agencies and researchers.

Any such dataset must be treated as one indicator of the prevalence and patterns of drug misuse and viewed alongside other established markers.

Most strains emerge when researchers require face-to-face interviews with agency clients (see panel). One cause is the belief that research and agency goals are incompatible: the researcher needs a subject to collect information from; the agency worker is in the business of addressing one or other aspect of the individual's drug problem, and will engage in assessment, counselling, therapy or referral.

But a closer examination reveals that researchers and agency workers both have a valuable role to play in understanding and addressing the issue of drug misuse, particularly in the light of HIV infection and AIDS. In this sense they are

working towards common goals. Yet barriers can form unless steps are taken to facilitate the practical needs of each party.

Both have responsibilities in this respect. The agency should discuss the most appropriate ways of accommodating research without unnecessary disruption to the service. They should be frank and precise about the difficulties posed by any proposed research. Agencies should ask to see the questionnaire and interview schedules so as to iron out any doubts they may have as to the suitability of the interview for their clients. This means setting aside time at the start of the project for staff members to air their views and discuss possible stumbling blocks. Feedback to the researcher will enable them to take account of any comments.

The agency should make clear to the researcher the philosophy which underpins their work and outline how they would prefer the research to be conducted. It may even be appropriate for a 'contract' to be drawn up with the researcher, agreeing details such as timetable, sample size, working procedures and dates for feedback.

Setting aside time early on to lay down the parameters for external research will result in fewer problems as the project unfolds, and should ensure a good working relationship between the parties. Nonetheless, researchers must never underestimate the demands they place on collaborating agencies. They should take steps to see that such demands do not become unreasonable or inappropriate, and that they are handled sensitively. In the final analysis, the researcher is the outsider making demands and should remember that the goodwill and cooperation of agency workers (at all levels) is essential for the smooth running and successful completion of a research project.

It is imperative that researchers liaise with workers at every level of the agency's structure. A project may have been approved at management committee level, but it is crucial that representatives of all staff members are involved at some stage in discussion and negotiation. Researchers should take time to present their project to all those involved, so that reservations can be discussed and resolved. How the research can benefit the agency should be outlined.

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Ways to make the research interview a positive experience

Researchers must be keenly aware of the potentially intrusive nature of their intervention. Much of the information they require is sensitive and extremely personal. It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure sufficient thought is given to the structures, order and wording of questions so as to make the experience of being interviewed as positive as possible for the drug user. Such considerations are rarely, if ever, a priority in drugs research.

This may mean allocating time for the interviewee to talk about issues that bother them and to expound views and histories not directly relevant to the research. Where possible, the researcher should allow time either side of the interview to chat with respondents to put them at their ease and to gain their confidence. Researchers should always reassure respondents that the interview is totally confidential and that nothing

will be relayed back to agency workers.

Where a client finds the interview distressing, it is the researcher's responsibility to do all they can to retrieve the situation and to ensure the agency worker concerned is informed so appropriate action can be taken. In the best of worlds, a contingency plan would be devised, with the researcher knowing who is on call should they be needed.

At the more basic level, consideration should be given to the length of the questionnaire and the time demands that the research makes on both the agency and the respondent. Experience suggests that face-to-face interviews should rarely last more than an hour. Researchers must be prepared to fit the interview into the agency's counselling and administrative timetable, even if this means working outside office hours and at weekends.

Wherever appropriate and possible, agency staff should be co-opted to the research management committee to act as spokespersons for, and conveyors of information to, their agencies.

At the outset it is important for the researchers to familiarise themselves with the ethos and goals of each agency and to be aware of these when dealing with clients and working with staff. It might be that the agency does not take extensive case notes from a client until they have settled into the programme. It would then be inappropriate for the researcher to insist on

in-depth interviews with clients at first agency contact. No two agencies are identical and research methods must be adapted to each individually.

Gaining the respect and goodwill of agency staff is the cornerstone of a successful working relationship. With this in mind, researchers should consider offering their services as volunteers as a way of redressing the balance of demands. Volunteering also has benefits for the researcher. It is likely to cement good relationships with the agency, and provides an opportu-

nity for participant observation. Relationships and contacts made with drug users will prove beneficial for current and future research.

To perpetuate good working relationships, adequate dissemination of the results of the study is essential and should be built into the research timetable. Seminars and workshops could be organised to disseminate findings to an audience that includes participating agencies. The timing and location of such events should maximise the number of agency workers able to attend. At the very least, agencies should receive copies of completed research reports.

An issue seldom discussed in the world of drugs research is the competition between various units for access to agencies and their clients. It is essential that regular forums are held so that all interested parties, most importantly, the agencies themselves, are informed about current developments and projected studies. Experiences and problems could be shared and methods discussed. Such a forum might even generate standards of conduct and codes of practice.

IDEALLY, the agency/researcher relationship should be a symbiotic one where treatment interventions include an inbuilt research component and both parties discuss ways of achieving common aims. In this context, developmental work can evolve in tandem, with research informing the development of treatment options and responding to changing clinical and policy needs. Flexible models of research can be developed that are able to account for changing needs and which can be accommodated alongside more long-term goals. At the end of the day it is in everyone's interest, not least the drug using community, that such links are secured and built upon so that informed and relevant responses are devised to address contemporary issues. ■

REVIEWS

LEARNING ABOUT AIDS. EXERCISES AND MATERIALS FOR ADULT EDUCATION ABOUT HIV INFECTION AND AIDS. Peter Aggleton *et al.* Churchill Livingstone, 1989. £19.95.

This is an excellent package of materials through which educators can begin to address the emotive and often fearful concerns people have about HIV and AIDS.

The Learning about AIDS project piloted its work in the health, education and social services, and the voluntary sector. As a result, the authors chose to use an approach based on a process of clarification — enabling individuals to *clarify* what they already know and feel about HIV and AIDS, and to consider the implications of further factual information for their own lifestyles and behaviour.

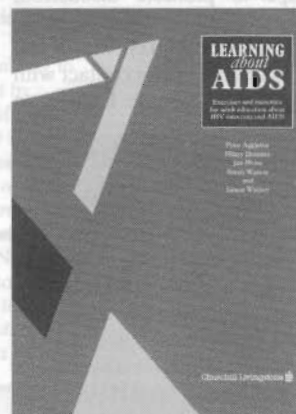
The materials adopt a participatory style, which best enables people's existing feelings and reactions to HIV and AIDS to be articulated and explored. The package is especially useful for drug educators, who have often had to develop HIV course programmes with few sources of reference. It includes a well indexed, easy to read, separately available booklet (*AIDS: Scientific and Social Issues*) as a background text. At strategic points in the exercises, educators are referred to relevant parts of the booklet.

The important equal opportunities issues inherent in education about HIV and AIDS are stressed. Before using the materials, educators are advised to consider their own responses to the issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism and homophobia.

The exercises are the core of the package. Well presented, on easy to photocopy A4 sheets, they cover eight categories. Between the Introduction and the Course Closure exercises, they range across medical and scientific facts, sexuality and safer sex, and injecting drug use. Particularly welcome and important are sections on confidentiality and on understanding individuals' personal and professional lives.

There is an introduction sheet for each category, followed by a careful explanation of each of the exercises under four simple headings: Aims; What You Need; What to Do; Likely Outcome. Given the acknowledged difficulties among drug educators in devising successful materials on sexuality and safer sex, this section of the package is especially useful. It addresses stereotypes about sexual identities and sexual behaviour, sexual language, and how to negotiate safer sex. A humorous card version of TV's *Blind Date* helps participants to examine the ways prospective sexual partners are chosen and how we assess potential HIV risks.

The only areas of HIV education not covered



'An invaluable resource' for drug trainers wishing to develop their HIV and AIDS programmes.

in the pack are death, dying, and loss, as these were outside the project brief. Otherwise it is a comprehensive, well researched set of materials, and an invaluable resource for drug educators seeking to address HIV in their training.

Breda Flaherty

Training Officer, Standing Conference on Drug Abuse

The *Learning about AIDS* materials are available from ISDD at £22 inc. p&p.

See page 9 for how these materials escaped government vetting.