

The treatment matrix

A new, all-encompassing database gives practitioners and commissioners unprecedented power to pinpoint key areas of best practice in the drug and alcohol field.

Mike Ashton reveals its secrets.

In some ways a child of the now deceased library of the Institute for the Study of Drug Dependence (ISDD) – one of the two agencies which merged to form DrugScope – the Matrices fill a gap in evidence base resources so obvious that you may wonder why it was left unfilled until May this year.

Since 1997 *Drug and Alcohol Findings* has made 'what works' research accessible and understandable to UK

practitioners, so they can use it to substantiate and improve their practice. Additions to its in-house library – at 17,000 documents, now the largest live drug and alcohol library in Britain – feed the growing Effectiveness Bank database holding over 900 analyses. New deposits in the bank are brought to subscribers' attention via a mailing list and DrugScope's daily news service.

That service answers one need – to

bring research to practitioners – but at the same time poses another: from all these riches, can we somehow identify the major documents practitioners in Britain should read even if they read nothing else?

In relation to adult treatment, just such a discussion took place in a subgroup of the Substance Misuse Skills Consortium, the sector-led partnership that aims to develop the substance

misuse treatment workforce in England. Drug and Alcohol Findings participated and undertook to complete the task, the plan for which included one fundamental innovation.

Before listing important documents, a map would be created of the evidence base universe in relation to treatment and allied topics. It would be divided in to territories that reflect logical and practical divisions in the delivery and organisation of services and in the roles of practitioners, regardless of whether there were any documents worth signposting within each division. Only then would a search be conducted for documents to fill the gaps. Some territories would have only rarely and partially been explored, others are relatively well mapped. As well as signposting the achievements, the exercise would expose the gaps in the evidence base.

Findings had already constructed a matrix for the consortium which mapped the treatment evidence base, though for a different purpose. Funded via the National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse, *Findings* undertook to develop this framework into matrices presenting the most important documents and resources for treatment practitioners and commissioners concerned to understand the evidential basis for their work and to implement its most important lessons.

The level of ambition involved can hardly be overestimated. Despite the obvious need, no agency, no matter how well funded or how expertly staffed, from multi-million dollar US government institutions to the UN's World Health Organization, had attempted such a project.

In Britain it could only be envisaged within a reasonable time frame and limited resources because for the past 16 years, *Drug and Alcohol Findings* had been monitoring and collecting evaluation research, assessing the studies, and selecting and analysing those of greatest relevance to the UK. Along the way, seminal research had been identified and analysed in its own right (the Old Gold series in the *Findings* magazine – see <http://tinyurl.com/EfB-cdl-6>) and as the backdrop to understanding more recent work. Reviews were collected and read to help understand the significance of each individual study and guidance documents to help make sense of what they might mean for the UK. On this foundation could rapidly be constructed this ambitious superstructure.

In May this year the result was the Matrices, one for harm reduction

and treatment of problems related to the use of illegal drugs, another for brief interventions and treatment of alcohol-related problems. The best way to envisage them is of course to go see. Across the top are five columns, moving from the intervention itself – is it feasible? does it work? how does it work? – out to the contexts within which interventions are implemented: by practitioners, who are managed, work in organisations, which coalesce in to whole treatment systems, all of which affect the treatment's feasibility and impacts, contexts variously of greatest interest to front-line staff, supervisors and managers, management committees, and commissioners.

INSTEAD OF SIMPLY LISTING IMPORTANT DOCUMENTS, A MAP WOULD BE CREATED OF THE EVIDENCE BASE UNIVERSE IN RELATION TO TREATMENT AND ALLIED TOPICS

Intersecting the contexts, down the side are five rows. Choose whether your interest is harm reduction (drugs only), brief interventions (alcohol only), cross-cutting treatment issues, medical treatments, psychosocial therapies, or criminal justice work.

For both drugs and alcohol, the result is a 5x5 grid totalling 25 cells. Within each cell are the major historical and contemporary research landmarks in that territory, reviews offering a panoramic view, expert guidance based on this research, and an option to yourself explore beyond these dozen or so selected documents by searching the Effectiveness Bank. Each document entry can be clicked on to access the original document either directly or via the Effectiveness Bank's analysis of the study.

Arrangements have been made to update the Matrices on an annual basis, piggybacking on the work Drug and Alcohol Findings continues to do to identify and analyse documents for the Effectiveness Bank.

What can you do with the Matrices? As a manager, they list the documents you could advise new staff to read to help them understand the basis

for addiction treatment, commend to existing staff to advance their professional development, and you too could interrogate for practice-improvement clues from the world's leading researchers. They will help practitioners understand the most important foundations of their work and how to build on those, and help commissioners appreciate the different ways they can influence effectiveness. Familiarity with these relatively few documents could be seen as an indicator of an important dimension of the quality of an organisation and its staff – an appreciation of the key evidence on which practice has been built and can be improved.

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Find the Drug Matrix at: <http://tinyurl.com/EfB-cdl/download.php?file=dmatrix.htm>
the Alcohol Matrix at: <http://tinyurl.com/EfB-cdl/download.php?file=amatrix.htm>

Thanks to Lifeline's FEAD video bank web site (<http://www.fead.org.uk>) you can see and hear the Matrices' developer explaining their genesis and construction at: <http://www.fead.org.uk/video618/Mike-Ashton-'The-DoDo-Bird-Effect'-overview---from-the-Editor-of-Drug-and-Alcohol-Findings.html>

An updated version of the presentation's slides is available at: http://tinyurl.com/EfB-cdl/download.php?file=Chafetz_ME_1_presentation.pdf

This drills down to one study in one cell of the Alcohol Matrix – a seminal study from the 1950s which demonstrates that such work still has considerable current relevance.