

Reducing drug use in female street sex workers: a feasibility study

Background to the study

Most female street sex workers in the UK are affected by the use of illegal drugs, such as heroin and crack cocaine. For most of these women, heroin and crack use reinforces their dependency on sex work and adds to their health and social problems. The need to finance their drug use, and often that of a partner, frequently underpins their involvement in sex work. Drug intoxication also means they are less able to protect themselves whilst working.

Street sex workers who are drug-dependent find using treatment services difficult and when they do, typically don't benefit as much as other drug users. The 2010 UK Drug Strategy changed the emphasis for drug services from reducing harm through safer drug use to reducing harm by stopping drug use. This makes it even more important for drug services to provide effective treatment for these women.

Managing problem drug use amongst sex workers is complex. They can experience stigma in drug treatment groups from other drug service users. This prevents them from discussing their sex work, a major factor in their drug use. There is also evidence that many drug-using street sex workers are affected by post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from their life experiences. They are unlikely to benefit from other treatment unless this trauma is addressed.

Based on recent research, we have developed a plan to improve the results of drug treatment for these women, by organising NHS and voluntary sector services to work together. This new approach involves creating a stigma-free environment for street sex workers to discuss their work in drug treatment groups, as well as addressing trauma as part of the drug treatment.

How involvement developed

The project is led by Nikki Jeal who has worked with street sex workers in Bristol since 1998. She got involved in research because she wanted to improve the women's health and find ways to address their unmet health needs. Nikki has provided care at One25 (a voluntary service for female street sex workers), in jail and as a Forensic Medical Examiner. She therefore has longstanding relationships with many of the women through a range of settings.

The women involved have previously contributed both as advisors and as participants in an earlier qualitative study about poor drug treatment outcomes. Over time between 10 and 20 women have been involved in advising Nikki on research in this area, as well as in initiatives to improve services. Findings from a previous study led to this study at CLAHRC West.

How women have contributed

Public involvement takes place in an advisory group at One25 at meetings where refreshments and vouchers are provided to thank women for their work.

The women have helped with a number of tasks so far:

- Advising on research design
- Developing effective recruitment strategies
- Helping to develop advertising materials, supporting documents and fliers
- Thinking through how to follow up women who take part in the study
- Developing questions and wording for the topic guides
- Helping to draft a plain English summary.

Involvement of the women will continue throughout the life of the study.

Key benefits of involvement

The women's contributions have made a difference to all of the involvement tasks. Documents have been reworded, ideas have guided the design and conduct of the study. Some of the most important examples are:

- Planning a follow up study with a design including individualised randomisation would not be acceptable, so a cluster design would be needed.

- The usual recruitment approach based on letters would not work for several reasons, including that many women do not have secure accommodation. The advisory group strongly recommended a direct approach, and their input in developing recruitment plans was very important in getting ethical approval to conduct this study as proposed with a vulnerable group of service users.
- The study flier was designed to look like a night club flier with a “who, what, when, where, why” approach, based on their advice.

Nikki is clear that public involvement is something that is obviously needed, because it makes planning and running a study easier. The advisory group is important because it helps her understand what women do and don't want, and what will and won't work.

What will happen as a result of the study

The project will lead to a patient-focused care package for street sex workers in order to address their longstanding unmet health needs. This project, called the DUSK (Drug Use in Street Sex Workers) study, is being conducted by the University of Bristol and NIHR CLAHRC West in collaboration with:

One25

Bristol Drugs Project

Bristol ROADS (Recovery Orientated Alcohol and Drugs Service)

Avon & Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership NHS Trust

University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust

For more information

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