

A New Approach for Treating Substance-Abusing Offenders in Canadian Correctional Institutions

Field testing of a prerelease treatment program for substance-abusing offenders has recently been completed in the Ontario Region by Dr. Lynn Lightfoot of the Addiction Research Foundation.

The aim of the Offender Substance Abuse Pre-Release (OSAP) Program is to provide drug- and alcohol-abusing offenders with the cognitive and behavioural learning tools to help them function adequately in the community without consuming alcohol or drugs.

To be admitted to OSAP, the offender must be interviewed and must complete a self-reported inventory. The interview instrument - the Structured Addictions Assessment Interview for Selecting Treatment for Inmates (ASIST-I) -helps the interviewer collect information on the inmate's level of psychosocial functioning (during the six months before imprisonment), the causes and seriousness of daily life problems and, most importantly, the relationship of alcohol or drug abuse to the problems. The self-report inventory examines variables such as dependence on alcohol and drugs, psychopathology, authoritarianism, intelligence quotient, and organicity. Offenders who are assessed as promising and suitable candidates are admitted to the three-phase treatment program.

The first phase of OSAP attempts to motivate offenders to change in order to prepare them to acquire the skills necessary to curb their alcohol-or drug-abuse problem. This motivation process is based on the theoretical model of the change process developed by Prochaska and Climente in 1982, which recognizes that at the beginning of treatment, offenders are not at the same stage of readiness to change.

There are two stages of readiness to change in this first phase. Stage one is called precontemplation and involves no identification of a need to change by the inmate. The second stage is contemplation, in which participants become aware of a problem and develop the motivation and commitment to change.

In the second phase, offenders are taught skills such as positive assertion and stress management, whose inadequate development in the first phase contributed to the maintenance of substance abuse.

The third phase allows offenders to use their skills in institutional and community settings.

Eight to twelve inmates participate in the program, which involves group discussions on their lives and experiences. The program also includes individual counselling sessions as particular problems of a more personal nature often arise.

Results of three OSAP field tests, completed in 1988 and 1989, revealed that the program can effectively modify participants' attitudes toward drugs and alcohol and the potentially negative effects of these substances on their behavioural and cognitive skills. Furthermore, field test outcomes indicated increased knowledge about drugs and alcohol, management skills, employment skills and positive methods of problem solving.

The field test results and more extensive analysis of the program will enable researchers to assess the impact of OSAP on recidivism and substance reabuse by participants.

Lightfoot, L. (1990). The Offender Substance Abuse Pre-Release Program: An Empirically Based Model of Treatment for Offenders (unpublished report).