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Ways to improve workforce retention

Mental health and addiction specialist services in Aotearoa are struggling to recruit and retain the workforce required for current models of care, with future shortages predicted for practitioners specialising in addiction and/or CEP* practice. Up to 25% of respondents in the 2023 dapaanz member survey indicated that they expect to have left the sector within two years.

Better staff retention rates are critical – to maintain expected and forecast service levels, and also for the wellbeing and job satisfaction of existing staff. A number of suggestions emerged in the research that indicate how this can be done, relevant to the different stakeholder groups dapaanz works with.

Addressing challenging working conditions

The addiction workforce is facing a range of challenges in the current environment, including high workloads, burnout and staffing shortages. The review noted that some of the challenges facing the workforce are likely to be interconnected – for example, stressful work creates pressure for workers and then contributes to difficulties in retaining staff.

The addiction workforce review strongly recommends incremental structural and organisational efforts to address the issues that lead to these challenging and stressful work environments: from service design and adequate funding to enhanced training for team leaders and managers, wellbeing initiatives and other kaimahi support.

Retaining experienced practitioners for longer

The addiction workforce tends to be older than those working in general healthcare, with current estimates of around three quarters over the age of 40. A significant number are nearing retirement.

Retaining this experienced and motivated workforce for as long as possible is a priority. One way to do this is providing flexible working arrangements which allow experienced practitioners to continue offering their expertise into the early retirement years.

Stabilising remuneration levels across the sector

Remuneration levels are seen to be contributing to people leaving the addiction sector, including to take up other better paid healthcare positions. It was also reported that remuneration varied across organisations, with some offering 'very good' rates of pay, making it easier for them to attract candidates.

Some individuals were attracted by the earning potential in private practice or were moving to Health Improvement Practitioner roles which also pay higher rates.

“Those who can pay the highest rates seem to be the ones who can attract staff. The smaller NGOs, particularly the Māori ones, they're worse off, even though people say they want to work in those types of contracts. The pay is nowhere near what you can get at Te Whatu Ora for instance.”

The review noted that some organisations within the addiction sector need to address their remuneration rates to improve staff retention.

Promoting the specialist skillset of the addiction workforce to the wider health sector

A perception that the wider healthcare sector views addiction as a less professional, or lower-status healthcare profession may contribute to poor staff retention. Interviews with sector representatives highlighted a lack of recognition of the specialist skills held by addiction workers, particularly compared to other health workforce roles.

“Even though they've got their dapaanz registration and have all the same clinical knowledge, they're not seen as professional or as knowledgeable as the nurses and social workers.”

The addiction workforce review recommends that addiction sector leadership take a more proactive role in promoting the importance of suitably qualified, accredited technical experts in addiction practice to their health sector peers.

* CEP - supporting people with both addiction and mental health challenges.

Reducing societal stigma around seeking help for addiction

A number of dapaanz members cited the need for a wider **advocacy campaign** to the general public with the objective of de-stigmatising the need for addiction services and encouraging people who need support to be comfortable seeking it.

Further, **normalising addiction treatment services** among the public will not only encourage individuals to seek help but will also have flow-on effects in enhancing the status of services and ultimately supporting a more positive profile for the profession.

Leading the way with well-trained and informed managers

Effective leadership – at all levels – plays a key role in addressing sector challenges and strengthening staff retention, through improving workplace culture, helping people access the workforce, supporting worker wellbeing and countering negative workplace experiences such as bullying. Growing Māori, Pasifika and peer leadership helps to retain staff within these populations, to build capacity and support culturally appropriate models of service delivery.

“I think there’s a range of leadership...There’s strong clinical practice leadership, Māori leadership, lived experience leadership, whānau peer leadership, all of these we need to support.”

Senior management can provide effective leadership by promoting innovation, supporting performance measures, providing direction to staff and deploying resources effectively to achieve better services.

Lowering barriers to new entrants and younger professionals

The workforce review indicated that there should be a stronger pipeline into addiction services for new entrants and younger professionals. The review highlighted a number of ways this could be achieved.

Making available more education scholarships and placement opportunities would help to make the profession more attractive to new entrants. In addition, providing more support and mentoring once younger professionals have commenced their career would also improve retention.

Profiling the benefits of working in NZ

Global competition for roles is a key challenge in retaining staff in Aotearoa. Some addiction practitioners are relocating to Australia, due to attractive working conditions and the potential for better remuneration than what New Zealand has to offer.

The 2023 dapaanz member survey identified that just over one third of the workforce had considered moving to Australia in the past 12 months, including half of those aged under 45 years and 36% of Māori members.

Addressing some of these discrepancies and communicating the benefits of working in New Zealand can assist in reversing the loss of addiction service professionals to overseas markets.



Other snapshots in this series:

1. The addiction workforce in Aotearoa | **1a.** Profile of the addiction workforce | **2.** Unpacking the workforce shortage
3. Why are people leaving? | **4.** Ways to improve workforce retention | **5.** Opportunities for growing the addiction workforce
6. Growing the workforce: Recruitment ideas and challenges | **7.** Growing the workforce: New entrants and early career professionals

About dapaanz and the 2023 addiction workforce review

Dapaanz represents the professional interests of people working in addiction treatment. We are dedicated to supporting our members in their mahi and careers, while fostering excellence in addiction practice.

We oversee the addiction intervention competency framework, which defines the addiction scope of practice, and we are kaitiaki of Tikanga Matatika, the code of ethics for the sector.

Our current focus is ensuring our members feel supported and nurtured so that they are excited about being addiction practitioners today and in the future.

In 2023, dapaanz commissioned a mixed methods review of the addiction workforce in Aotearoa. Drawing on multiple datasets, both published and unpublished, from a range of sources including Te Whatu Ora, Te Pou, and dapaanz, the data were organised into a coding framework and triangulated to identify overlapping patterns. A series of workshops and discussions were undertaken with sector representatives to gather additional insights and further feedback on the data findings. The review also distilled a number of findings from national and international literature.