

How COVID-19 affected PWUD and drug services in Austria at an early stage of containment measures

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Background/ Methodology

- » European rapid assessment on the impact of COVID-19 in April 2020 initiated by EMCDDA
- » Identify effects and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting challenges on drug use, harms and on availability of drug services at a very early stage of containment measures
- » Austrian Reitox Focal Point (GOEG) conducted national assessment between 8 and 16 April 2020
- » EMCDDA's questionnaire was sent out to all provincial drug coordinators

Remarks

- » Assessment conducted at very early stage of containment measures
- » Description of the impact is mainly based on a generally perceived assessment of the situation
- » Mixture of provincial and facility level input
 - » In total 25 questionnaires from 8 provinces

Implications of C-19 on drug services in AT

Overall slight decrease in demand and availability

- » **Reason 1: *reduction of services***
 - » reduction/ termination of e.g. group settings, scheduled detox, client contacts within prison from external services
 - » lack of appropriate hygiene and safety measures for professionals/clients

- » **Reason 2: *changes in regard to services delivered***
 - » Need for reduction of direct client contacts and changeover to ICT use to mitigate face-to-face therapeutic services
 - » Lack of required ICT equipment on client's side
 - » Initial and admission interviews and thus new admissions challenging

Implications of C-19 on OST in AT

OST demand:

- » generally stable situation
- » patients with psychiatric co-morbidity showed an increased demand
- » treatment entrances partly declined

OST provision:

- » some difficulties in the very beginning
- » legal amendments on 22 March and 9 April aiming to simplify authorization of prescription by Public Health Officer, dispensing of medication, transmission of recipes by fax.
- » continuity of OST for those already in treatment assured
- » restriction of personal contact hindered overall psychosocial care and the assessment of patients' stability and general health

Implications of C-19 on HR services in AT

Harm reduction services: availability declined

» Reasons:

- » direct client contacts: drug streetwork as well as drug testing services (except from online consultations) were halted
- » low-threshold services basically focused on NSP only

» Customizations:

- » night shelters partly expanded to include day care provision for PWUD
- » outreach emergency care for PWUD in quarantine (provision of medication needed, safe use equipment...), e.g. in Vienna

Implications of C-19 on drug use and harm consequences

» **Patterns of drug use**

- » changes vary btw. reduced to higher risk consumption
- » drug use in group settings declined
- » no specific new risk behavior

» **Harms and other health and social consequences**

- » no changes in physical health
- » mental health: crisis especially among those with psychiatric co-morbidity – specifically in regard to containment measures and physical distancing policy
- » social consequences in regard to social isolation, increased need for food donations

Challenges and adaptations as a result of COVID-19

Re-organisation of service provision and co-ordination of network partners

Safety regulations

- » implementation of safety regulations on facility level, in particular low-threshold services
- » for staff members as well as clients/patients

Technical challenges

- » set up ICT/online services and deal with implications on quality of service provision
- » ICT/online contacts: difficult to maintain client contact and continuity of care/treatment

PWUD as a vulnerable group

- » provision of appropriate information to clients on COVID-19, drug use, OST

Conclusions

- » **First insight** into the handling of the C-19 pandemic by drug services in Austria
- » **Today's perspective** on results:
rather a description of the situation during lock-down
- » **Insights in the long-term adjustments:** 2nd wave of assessment in Q4/2020
 - » New service models, digital health approaches and treatment options post COVID-19?

References

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