



SMOKING AND MENTAL HEALTH: results of an online survey sent to VHS members about smoking and mental health

Background

ASH Scotland, the independent Scottish charity taking action to reduce the harm caused by tobacco, worked with VHS earlier this year on an area of mutual interest: mental health. VHS agreed to distribute to its membership an ASH Scotland survey which asked about organisational experiences and views of smoking/tobacco-related work.

This survey was intended to establish what, if any, smoking- and tobacco-related work has been, is being, or could be done by voluntary health organisations. It was particularly interested to hear from organisations whose remit includes supporting those with mental health issues.

According to ASH:

‘Smoking rates amongst people with a mental health disorder are significantly higher than in the general population and there is growing evidence to show a strong association between smoking and mental health disorders. This association becomes stronger relative to the severity of the mental disorder, with the highest levels of smoking found in psychiatric in-patients. It is estimated that of the 10 million smokers in the UK about 3 million have a mental disorder.’

SURVEY FINDINGS

Method

The survey was developed by ASH Scotland in consultation with VHS and distributed by VHS to its membership over a four-week period in April-May 2015. It was circulated to 260 different organisations, with 61 discrete responses – a return rate of around 23%. Of those 61 responses, however, only 49 continued on past the first question (about identifying the type of organisation they worked for), so the return rate on relevant data is closer to 19%. Because of this, answers provided by individual organisations can’t be taken as representative of *all* VHS member organisations, merely a *sample* of them.

The overwhelming majority of respondents completed the survey on behalf of a community/voluntary sector organisation. Two respondents worked for the NHS and there were no responses from any Local Authority organisation.

Client groups

From the survey, it is clear that VHS engages with a wide range of organisations, which have a broad range of users. Many had not specifically considered smoking and/or tobacco use as being within their area of legitimate interest or remit. However, VHS members also include organisations working with specific conditions (e.g. people with cancer, dementia or HIV) where there are already clear links with smoking. Similarly, organisations working in the fields of mental health and/or substance abuse will have significant experience of the impact of smoking. One organisation commented that ‘our members have had laryngeal cancer – mainly due to smoking’.

Smoking/tobacco-related activity

Although several organisations have hosted some sort of a health event which included a focus on smoking or tobacco use, almost two-thirds have never hosted such an event. Other activities highlighted include: involvement in the Scottish Parliament’s Tobacco Cross Party Group; training on lifestyle/physical health issues; and participation in No Smoking Day.

Impact of tobacco/smoking on client group

A majority of respondents thought that smoking/using tobacco was impacting on the physical health and wellbeing of their clients/service users, with 70% also believing that it was reducing the available disposable income of their clients. This is of particular concern, since people who live in areas of economic deprivation are more likely to be smokers and to smoke more than those living in affluent areas, and to spend a higher proportion of their total income on tobacco products, all of which compound existing inequalities.

There was also acknowledgement that smoking/using tobacco may be impacting on others’ health, e.g. through second-hand smoke and on their own mental health.

Prominence of smoking/tobacco use issues in voluntary health organisations

Many organisations recognised that smoking was a topic of discussion within their client group and/or workforce. A couple of direct comments were made:

- *“I think that it is probably an issue for some of our members, especially those working with people resident in hospitals, units or shared accommodation”*
- *“member[s] have had throat cancer - most due to smoking”*

Tobacco Awareness-Raising Sessions

The survey sought to gauge the level of potential interest in organisations receiving a Tobacco Awareness-Raising Session (TARS) from ASH Scotland – these are information sessions, designed to last about an hour and with the aim of exploring if/how smoking and tobacco use might be affecting service users/clients of that organisation. Around a third responded positively and ASH Scotland is following this up.

Further activity around smoking and tobacco

The final question of the survey asked respondees to state if there was any further tobacco-related work that they might be interested in at a future date (e.g. training, assistance with writing or updating tobacco policies, ideas for how to engage service users around smoking-related issues). The responses ranged from the specific – covering the impact on children’s health or people living with dementia – to a broad welcoming of opportunities to collaborate with VHS and ASH Scotland.

Possible Actions

ASH Scotland:

- Will follow up the responses and if there is sufficient interest, may recommend to VHS that a joint event is held to address issues revealed by the survey.
- Will also explore the possible **untapped need for supporting organisations via a range of activities such as policy development, facilitated discussion, awareness-raising or training.**
- **Explore the possibility of providing Tobacco Awareness-Raising Sessions (TARS)** to those organisations that expressed an interest.

VHS will:

- **Develop a programme of work on mental health, which might include work around smoking/addiction**
- Continue dialogue with ASH Scotland to establish the range and scope of any future joint work across smoking/tobacco-related topics.

For further information or to comment on the findings and suggested actions, please contact one of the following:

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