

Healing bodies and minds

Good nutrition should be an essential element in treatment for those with drug and alcohol dependencies. Helen Sandwell reports.

My friend Andre gets an organic vegetable box, cooks up delicious dinners for friends and has herbs on his windowsill. He also has hepatitis C, epilepsy and a heart damaged by an infection caught from a dirty needle many years ago. He has had a thrombosis, a stroke, and been seriously undernourished, all the result of injecting heroin.

Studies have estimated rates of undernutrition in substance misusers to be a staggering 50-60%. The British Dietetic Association, the professional body for State Registered Dietitians, produces no specific guidance for providing dietary advice to drug and alcohol users, despite the high rates of undernutrition and the many complex physical and mental health problems affecting this group. Substance misusers remain a much neglected group when it comes to professional nutritional support, since very few dietitians work in the drug and alcohol field.

Sally Sandford is one of a handful who does. She works with active drug and alcohol users in Leeds where she is involved in a project handing out emergency food parcels to young drugs users suspected of being at risk of poor nutrition.

"Three days guaranteed emergency food helps them to focus on other issues such as engaging with services which will hopefully help them into treatment," says Sandford. "During this time the drugs workers help sort out factors which may be contributing to their clients' malnutrition, such as being homeless or not having received a benefit cheque."

Recent intervention studies have shown that a range of mental health conditions including clinical depression, bipolar disorder, and Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder can be improved by diet. A small-scale randomised control trial demonstrated that young adult prisoners taking nutritional supplements for a minimum of two weeks, and a maximum of nine months, showed a 35% reduction in offences (committed in jail) during the supplementation period as compared to a 6.7% reduction for those receiving a placebo.

It makes good sense that advice on healthy eating should form an integral part of drug and alcohol rehabilitation. In spite of all this, treatment programmes do not as a matter of course contain a healthy eating element.

The National Treatment Agency publishes *Models of Care* which is a framework describing the range of drug treatment services that should be available around the country. The *Models of Care* makes only cursory mention of nutrition and does not include it as a part of recommended treatment. When I enquired further about this with the NTA I was told by Joanna Sullivan, Senior Communications Officer, that no one had ever asked that before and that the *Models of Care* were based on research evidence and nutrition does not fall within the treatment guidelines.

Despite the lack of interest at the top, people working face to face with drug and alcohol users are becoming more aware of the need for provision of healthy food and sound healthy eating advice for their clients. Simon Shepherd, the Chief Executive of the Federation of Drug and Alcohol Professionals (FDAP), says, "Diet is an area that a lot of workers in the field feel has been neglected. They are keen to know more about it, both in terms of the advice they give to clients and, in the case of residential treatment, the best meals to provide for people staying there."

As awareness of the importance of good nutrition for drug and alcohol users grows, success stories are beginning to emerge, as at Clouds House, a residential treatment centre. Claire Clarke, head of treatment services at Clouds took the brave step of overhauling menus, risking dissent from residents. "Vending



Terry, one of the catering team at Clouds House, where good nutrition is an integral part of the recovery programme.

machines with fizzy drinks and confectionery were removed and were replaced with fresh fruit and water dispensers. Coffee in the evening was replaced with herbal teas," said Claire. "Chefs reduced salt, sugar and saturated fats in meals and introduced more fresh fruit and vegetables with more meals made from scratch."

At the end of each meal time, the chefs go into the dining room to see that everyone has eaten their meals and that there were no problems. Encouragingly, the new menus have been received well by Clouds' clients. "Staff have witnessed more settled behaviour and better sleeping patterns amongst residents," said Claire. "Clients too are noticing the benefits and are actively learning more about healthy eating to prepare them for life beyond treatment."

Richard Humphreys, a worker for Drugline in Birmingham, is very enthusiastic about healthy eating in his work, "We have recently secured funding of £5 per day to pilot giving healthy food to clients using our service. When we offer the fruit we can ask the client how they are eating and explain that we have a range of other healthy living resources available. We can provide leaflets relating to diet and physical and mental health. If I had more time to spend on this I would go a lot further!"

Andre, who nearly lost his life several times to his heroin addiction, has been clean for a couple of years now and feels that healthy eating is a very important part of his life. The people whose lives could be improved by healthy eating are eager, even if those at the top who have the power to effect major change are dragging their feet.

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Lunch time at Clouds House – on the menu is roasted veg, roast pork and red lentil soup with wholemeal rolls.

