

Language can be powerful beyond measure

We want Welsh Government and key stakeholders to adopt a change in language to help reduce stigma among people who use substances.



Why does language matter?

The language used when speaking about, or referring to people who use substances, can have a significant impact on how they view themselves and how others view them too. There are countless terms used within the substance use field, and beyond, that are viewed as judgemental, moralistic, inhumane, and stigmatising and it is the latter that often acts as the main protagonist to marginalising people who use substances and those affected by such behaviour.

People who use substances can often be alienated against, and defined by the behaviour they undertake, usually by the words and language used by others to describe them and their actions. The fact they are people with their own personalities and unique skill sets, and are often someone's someone, tends to get lost in conversation among the public and media.

What does the evidence suggest?

Inappropriate, judgemental, and inhumane language, often built upon inaccurate and disproportionate beliefs, can perpetuate fear and stigma. It is with the latter that often acts a significant barrier to people affected by substance use reaching out and seeking support. [1,2] Additionally, this can lead to people who use substances to further remove themselves from friends, family, and society, which can not only affect relationships and weaken their social support network that is often a fundamental part of recovery capital, [3] but can lead them to undertake risky behaviour that can increase the risk of significant harms, including death.

Use of language and the stigma generated from this can also work the other way round. It can lead to people wanting to distance themselves away from people who use substances, as well as whip up a sense of fear and anger towards an already marginalised and vulnerable population within our society. [2] Language can also have a negative influence on health care provider perceptions of people who use substances and subsequently impact the care and treatment they provide. [4]

It is not just the impact stigma can have on people who use substances. It can also adversely affect their loved ones and concerned others. Adfam, a national charity tackling the negative effects of drugs and alcohol on family members and friends, state that 2 million concerned others have experienced stigma and judgement as a result of someone else's substance use. [5]

✓ USE	✗ DON'T USE
Person who uses drugs	Drug user
Person with non-problematic drug use	Recreational, casual, or experimental users
Person with drug dependence, person with problematic drug use, person with substance use disorder; person who uses drugs (when use is not problematic)	Addict; drug/substance abuser; junkie; dope head, pothead, smack head, crackhead etc.; druggie; stoner
Substance use disorder; problematic drug use	Drug habit
Has a X use disorder	Addicted to X
Abstinent; person who has stopped using drugs	Clean
Actively uses drugs; positive for substance use	Dirty (as in "dirty screen")
Respond, program, address, manage	Fight, counter, combat drugs and other combatant language
Safe consumption facility	Fix rooms
Person in recovery, person in long-term recovery	Former addicts; reformed addict
Person who injects drugs	Injecting drug user
Opioid substitution therapy	Opioid replacement therapy

Global Commission on Drug Policy outlining that the use of better language can help change perception regarding substance use and people who use substances. [6]

Why now?

There is a gap within the Welsh substance use field for the advocacy of appropriate and respectful language towards people who use substances. Over the last decade there has been a focus on developing resources and influencing a change of language towards a people-first approach within various fields including mental health [7], gambling [8] and substance use [9], to name just a few. However there remains room for improvement and amendments within statutory bodies, treatment services and the media, to adopt a people-first approach that better reflects people in general, as well as minimising and challenging stigmatising language.

Relevant divisions within statutory bodies including Welsh Government and Public Health Wales (PHW) still utilise terminology such as ‘misuse’, both within the titles of their respective units but also within documents and policies. [10,11] Yet there is a consensus that the word ‘misuse’ can be “regarded as stigmatising or derogatory to people with a substance problem, as it promotes the idea that that kind of use is wholly distinct from other people’s use of the same substance, which is not always the case”. [9] It is time to move away from terms such as misuse and for leadership to be shown to help influence a change in language and a subsequent mindset relating to substance use and people who use substances, that can help reduce stigma that can have such damning effects.

All too often, headlines, and even people commenting within such pieces, use derogatory language, such as ‘addict’ and ‘zombie’ that only perpetuates societal stigma regarding substance use. [12, 13, 14, 15] Given the wide audience reach of the media, we aim for changes made by Welsh Government and PHW, in combination with the utilisation of documents such as that developed by Scottish Families Affected by Alcohol and Drugs, in partnership with Adfam, named ‘Reporting of Substance Media Toolkit’, [16] to influence a shift of how people who use, and are affected by, substances are viewed.

What have Barod done and our next steps?

Up until the time of writing, Barod has undertaken an internal audit to review and amend various pieces of literature, including content on our website and internal policies, to adhere to our own commitment using less moralistic and stigmatising language. We are also committed to ensuring that our future content, including everyday conversation, resources, social media and media-related comments, align with language that represents a high level of dignity and respect towards people who use, and are affected by, substances.

During 2024, we will be undertaking an extensive consultation exercise with people with lived experience of substance use, to gain a better understanding about the use of certain language that will help formulate a co-produced, bi-lingual terminology glossary. Subsequently, we aim for this document to represent the views of people with lived experience of substance use, as well as help improve communication and shared understanding of the impact of language used in everyday conversation across the substance use field, and the public, in Wales..

What do we want?

- We call on statutory bodies including Welsh Government and Public Health Wales, to change the name of their respective substance misuse units to ‘substance use’.
- Statutory bodies to review and amend existing policies, strategies, frameworks, and reports regarding their use of the word ‘misuse’ and change to ‘use’ and to adopt this change in terminology for future documents.
- Welsh Government to lobby with Members of the Senedd to adopt a change in language when discussing substance use within public forums and lead by example via the adopted person-first language.
- Once developed, Welsh Government to endorse Barod’s co-produced bi-lingual terminology glossary and for its contents to be adopted by various stakeholders when communicating about substance use.

References

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