

Harm reduction in substance use: Perspectives and experiences of community volunteers and student interns in Durban, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION/RATIONALE

Substance use is a major public health concern globally & in South Africa.

Harm reduction has gained recognition internationally, but its uptake in South Africa remains limited and uneven.

Bellhaven Harm Reduction Centre (BHRC) is among the few urban harm reduction sites in the country.

This study explores the perceptions and experiences of volunteers and interns at BHRC.

OBJECTIVES

Explore how community volunteers and student interns perceive harm reduction interventions.

Understand the volunteers/inters' experiences within a harm reduction setting in Durban.

Examine how participation in harm reduction processes shaped their attitudes toward harm reduction, substance use and recovery.

STUDY SITE

- Conducted at BHRC, First Avenue, Greyville, Durban.
- BHRC provides outpatient services, Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST) program, psychosocial support, HIV/TB services, warm showers & non-stigmatizing care for key populations including people who use substances, sex workers and those experiencing homelessness.
- Context: BHRC is an urban, resource-constrained, but compassionate and inclusive environment.

Methods: Design & Participants

- Qualitative design.
- 15 participants: 2 community volunteers, 3 final-year Social Work students (UKZN), 10 postgraduate homeopathy students (DUT).
- Data was collected via online structured interviews.
- Thematic analysis followed Braun & Clarke's six-phase process.
- Ethics approval was received from DUT, informed consent obtained from participants & pseudonyms used to protect participants' identity.

Key themes identified

- Client-centredness of harm reduction interventions
- Stigma reduction and attitude transformation
- Capacity-building for volunteers/interns
- Reduction of substance-use related harm

Theme 1: Client-centredness

- BHRC was perceived as non-judgmental, inclusive, and safe.
- Participants described BHRC as a “*home away from home*.”
- Services at BHRC met clients where they were, not requiring abstinence first.

Patient-Centered Care



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Theme 2: Stigma reduction

- Participants' perceptions shifted from fear and judgement to empathy.
- Exposure to clients fostered understanding of addiction as a health issue.
- Stigma reduction extended to their communities.



Theme 3: Capacity-building

- Volunteers and interns gained practical experience and professional growth.
- Learned patience, empathy, and multidisciplinary teamwork.
- Staff support contributed to learning and confidence.



Theme 4: Reduction of harm

- Participants' initial scepticism about harm reduction shifted to recognition of its benefits.
- They had eventually seen harm reduction as empowering, client-driven, and effective in improving wellbeing.
- However, there are contextual challenges they observed: Ongoing drug availability, socio-economic barriers.



Discussion & implications

- Harm reduction viable EVEN in South African resource-limited contexts.
- Training in such settings builds capacity and empathy among health and social care students.
- Integration into academic curricula could strengthen public health practice.



Strengths & limitations

Strengths:

- ASSUMED to be the first qualitative study of its kind in SA.
- Rich insight from multiple professional backgrounds.

Limitations:

- Single-site study (BHRC) limits generalisability.
- Small sample (n=15).



Conclusion

- BHRC exemplifies inclusive, client-centred harm reduction environment.
- Participation at a harm reduction centre transformed volunteers' and interns' attitudes.
- Harm reduction holds promise for expanding compassionate, effective substance use care in South Africa.



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Thank you!

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