

SERVICE QUALITY MEASURES INITIATIVE: IMPROVING SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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The Goal: This initiative seeks to guide national substance abuse treatment policy, service planning and delivery, and service improvement through development of a platform of **Service Quality Measures** that assess the performance of substance abuse treatment programmes. This platform is currently lacking in South African substance abuse treatment services.

Although the focus of the current project is on establishing an evidence-based approach for improving substance abuse treatment services, what we learn from this effort can be readily applied to a broad range of human services including those directed to HIV and AIDS, child welfare, mental health, and so forth. Therefore, the ultimate impact of this project may extend well beyond the field of substance abuse, providing an important tool for improving services throughout the social development and health sectors.

Why Service Quality Measures? Performance measures of service quality hold much value for policy makers, service planners, and service providers:

- For **policy makers**, Service Quality Measures can provide a strong, empirical foundation for national policy. Such policies can be based on actual programme performance.
- For **service planners**, performance information can facilitate evidence-based decision-making around limited resources, new funding directions, and quality improvement projects.
- For **service providers**, service quality data will be useful for guiding decisions about strategic programme directions. For instance, performance measures can be used to improve public confidence in a particular service's ability to perform effectively.

Yet, despite the high levels of substance abuse in South Africa and concerns about service effectiveness, substance abuse treatment programmes currently do not collect data on the quality of services provided. This deficit hampers efforts to

improve service delivery at this intersection of the health and social welfare systems.

The Initiative: Designed as a participatory, collaborative effort between key stakeholders, this initiative brings together representatives from the National Departments of Health and Social Development, the Central Drug Authority, universities and research councils, and substance abuse service provider programmes. It builds upon other national efforts, including the Department of Social Development's norms and standards initiative and related efforts to register and accredit substance abuse treatment services. The initiative is managed by the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Research Unit of the Medical Research Council. Expert advice is available through U.S. consultants.

The initiative will develop, pilot, and implement a small set of valid and reliable service quality measures for South Africa's substance abuse treatment programmes. These measures will address service effectiveness, efficiency, accessibility, and quality. The initiative will have a special focus on the extent to which HIV risk is addressed within substance abuse services. This is important given strong linkages between substance use and sexual risk behaviours and findings that individuals with substance use disorders are particularly vulnerable to HIV.

The initiative was launched in Cape Town in November 2008, when a Steering Committee of key stakeholders was formed. Since then, this Steering Committee has identified five principal goals for the South African substance abuse treatment system and a set of indicators that can be used to measure progress on each goal. The indicators cover the following domains: effectiveness, efficiency, person-centeredness, access and quality.

Immediate Next Steps: The Steering Committee will refine the selected indicators, designate Service Quality Measures for each indicator, and design a pilot project to test the measures in selected treatment programmes across the country.

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