

# Substance abuse among nurses

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*Dr Berryman is a senior lecturer at Victoria University in the School of Nursing and Midwifery. She has worked in a number of nursing areas since 1969 when she graduated as a nurse from the Alfred Hospital (Group T). She has specialised in Head Injury, Rehabilitation and Community, and worked in the area of Drugs and Alcohol for more than 20 years as a counsellor, teacher and program coordinator and currently manages the Graduate Diploma in Substance Abuse Studies at Victoria University and coordinates Honours and Postgraduate Courses at Victoria University. She has worked in academia for the past 12 years and been instrumental in designing educational programs for drug and alcohol workers at RMIT and VU. She is a member of the Steering Committee for the Nurses Health Program, a representative on the reference group for the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV) and the Australian Drug Foundation (ADF), and a Steering Committee of the support group 'Family Drug Help'.*

I have been asked to write about the Victorian Nurses Health Program (VNHP) and my PhD study. The VNHP is a free, independent discreet service for nurses and students with concerns relating to substance abuse or mental health. My PhD (University of Melbourne) was entitled 'Nurses' drug and alcohol use and dependence: creating understanding'. My thesis investigated issues related to the phenomenon of Victorian nurses and their drug and alcohol use and dependence. The research was divided into three separate sub-studies: sub-study 1, involved interviews with 39 key informants and stakeholders in nursing in Victoria. Sub-study 2 included 11 in-depth interviews with Victorian nurses who were self-defined as dependent on drugs and alcohol and confirmed using DSM-IV criteria. The interviews were analysed using 'grounded theory' approach. The third sub-study was a cross-sectional survey of 535 nurses employed in three hospitals in Victoria. Its purpose was to investigate drug and alcohol use by nurses and to collect demographic data.

Nurses in the three sub-studies viewed the use of alcohol, tranquillisers (especially benzodiazepines), tobacco and, to a lesser degree, cannabis, as acceptable substances for their personal use. However, the nursing profession only viewed these substances as problematic if nurses developed problems and dependencies with their use. The profession negatively regarded use of even small amounts of substances such as heroin, amphetamines and cocaine. When problematic use of any of these substances was evident, severe nurse censure would lead to termination of employment of the individual nurse.



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The three sub-studies indicated that the nursing profession's response to nurses with drug and alcohol problems was one based on mutual secret-keeping. This is evident in the secret-keeping of individual nurses with problematic substance use and attempts to gain treatment. The nursing profession is itself involved in secret-keeping through a culture of acceptance of certain drug use and current difficulty in dealing with problem drug use among nurses. Overall, the response of the nursing profession is to leave this issue underground. The dilemma is that by staying underground few realistic strategies and protocols can be put into place, which could help individual nurses, patient care and professional capacity building within the profession.

The VNHP is an outcome of my studies. A committee was formed with representatives from the Nurses Board of Victoria, the Victorian Branch of the Australian Nursing Federation and individual interested nurses (including myself). Like the doctors' program, the VNHP program is situated at St Vincent's Hospital. The Board has been appointed and Heather Pickard is program director. Since the VNHP opened, demand has quickly grown and many nurses and managers have sought help and advice about the program, which is a clear indication of the need for such a service. Although the program is funded through the Nurses Board of Victoria it is a fully independent legal entity with a five-member Board of Directors. The program provides a free confidential service to all nurses and students in Victoria and advice and support to managers and staff facing the challenge of managing substance abuse and mental health issues in the workplace. Nurses can refer themselves to the program or the workplace can refer nurses.

The VNHP conducts assessments, individual treatment plans and coordinates treatment, including appropriate referrals. After-care and re-entry to work is also covered. The VNHP values confidentiality and, unless compelled by law, participants are not divulged to anyone. Anonymous inquiries are also welcome.

Details are: Victorian Nurses Health Program.

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