The impact of regulations on the AOD worker

Drug use is a major issue in Australia, despite the illegality of many substances. It is therefore necessary to have an established field of services available for treatment, referral and other forms of public assistance. But what problems may be faced by workers in the alcohol and drug field with respect to the various regulations that exist? Let’s look at how these regulations could potentially affect those who work in the field.

Working with regulations in the alcohol/drug field

Community based services that operate within the field of drug and alcohol use are an important part of the National Drug Strategic Framework. The success of many harm-reduction strategies has been a direct result of community based organisations, which carry out vital work in the fields of prevention, treatment and research. This role is recognised as comprising of four main areas:

- the provision of counselling, support, treatment and care for people who experience drug related harm
- the provision of education, information and support to prevent and reduce drug related harm
- contributing to the development, delivery and evaluation of policies and programs
- advocating for specific policies or programs.

Given the wide range of activities conducted by community organisations, it is not surprising that these services often find themselves at the forefront of drug use. Understandably, this is also an area strongly influenced by the more regulatory aspects of our drug policy. Therefore, it is important for workers in these fields to be aware of regulations and laws that might affect the activities their services carry out. For example, people working in a methadone clinic must be aware of the regulations that govern the storage and administration of this controlled narcotic, and make sure that their organisation always meets these guidelines.

Generally, an organisation must demonstrate their ability to operate within the regulatory framework before they are granted permission to operate. In addition, most organisations produce an internal policy document, which helps to ensure that their operations continue to meet these guidelines. If you work in the drug and alcohol field, it is very important that you familiarise yourself with your organisation’s policy.
Criminal knowledge and client service: a question of ethics

A difficult truth of working in the alcohol/drug field is that a large proportion of your clients will be involved in the use of illegal substances, which essentially means that they could be viewed as criminals.

Naturally, not everybody who utilises these services fit into this category. For example, many organisations deal exclusively with either alcohol or tobacco users (such as Alcoholics Anonymous, or the Quit Campaign), while other services offer assistance and advice to families of drug users.

However, it is likely that illicit drugs will be involved in many of the cases that an alcohol or drug service will deal with, particularly in the fields of withdrawal or detoxification services. Obviously, it would be difficult (and unproductive) to view clients as criminals. The role of an alcohol/drug worker is to provide services and assistance to individuals as they are required. This role cannot be fulfilled if the criminal aspect of someone’s behaviour is focused upon, rather than on the need that clients have for a service. However, having knowledge of an individual’s use of illegal drugs can essentially put a worker in a difficult position with respect to the law.

So how is it possible to operate a successful service under such a condition? This issue is a major reason why services will construct an internal policy to govern their operation. Different types of services will handle the situation in different ways. For example, universities and other research bodies must ensure that all their activities adhere to guidelines established by the National Health and Medical Research Council, which ensures that the confidentiality of research participants is maintained at all times.

If you work in the drug and alcohol field, make sure you are familiar with your organisation’s internal policy in this area.