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**Greater Manchester Mental Health
NHS Foundation Trust's Approach to
Reducing Cocaine Related Harm:
A Best Practice Case Study**

This case study features one of the many approaches Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust (GMMH) are taking to reducing harm among people who use drugs across the region. GMMH's ambitious harm reduction plans reflect the much-needed response required to meet the needs of people who use their community drug and alcohol services, but also those who sit outside of them.

Background:

ONS data from 2023 reported that there were 1,118 deaths involving cocaine registered in 2023. This marks a consistent increase seen year by year, and the number of people who died where cocaine was implicated was 30.5% higher than in 2022. In 2011, there were 112 deaths involving cocaine, demonstrating an extremely concerning increase in drug-related deaths over this period of time.

“As the landscape regarding the people who are using drugs and also being harmed changes, it is important that we adapt and change how we respond to this need. This campaign is one example of this response happening, and I hope we will see initiatives such as this more consistently nationally.”

Danny Hames, Head of Inclusion, Chair of the NHS Addictions Provider Alliance

In the past 10 years in England, cocaine has been the second most frequently used illicit substance after cannabis, and cocaine related deaths, on average, affect more men than women (79.2% of males in 2023).

“I don't think people are aware of the risks and as such, with the increase in the use of it, we've also seen the increase in deaths. As a harm reduction team, what we're very interested in doing is reducing drug related deaths.”

GMMH has reached hepatitis C micro-elimination in their Bury, Salford and Trafford services, making great strides toward England's national ambition to eliminate hepatitis C!

Drug related deaths statistics (2023):

- In England and Wales 5,448 deaths from drug poisoning were recorded
- Opiates were involved in just under half of all drug poisoning deaths (12% higher than in 2022)
- Cocaine deaths rose by 30.5% in one year
- The North East continues to have the highest number of recorded deaths from drug poisoning and drug use
- People born in the 1970s continue to have the highest rate of death from drug use

Nigel Critchley, Harm Reduction Lead, Greater Manchester Mental Health NHS Foundation Trust

Dame Carol Black, in her Independent Review of Drugs, noted how powdered cocaine use was largely driven by the night-time economy and alcohol, with an estimated 976,000 people using it each year, most of whom were occasional users. The report noted in 2018 that only 3% of people using cocaine accessed treatment.

One of the main issues is that people using cocaine, particularly those not accessing drug and alcohol treatment services, might not have access to simple harm reduction messaging. One of the biggest risks is when cocaine is mixed with alcohol, causing the body to produce cocaethylene. Whilst cocaine may increase blood pressure and heart rate, cocaethylene can cause these to be even higher, even within people who are healthy, but particularly within those with underlying heart conditions, increasing the risk of heart attacks, strokes and seizures. Cocaethylene can reduce the rate at which the liver processes both cocaine and alcohol, putting extra pressure on the liver over time and causing serious damage.

Did you know you can send samples of drugs to be checked through Wedinos? WEDINOS - Sample Testing

Some cocaine might be adulterated with synthetic stimulants or other substances according to anecdotal evidence.

The Idea

We spoke to Nigel Critchley, Harm Reduction Lead (GMMH), about his plans for reducing cocaine related harm through getting key messages to people using it.

Essentially, Nigel aimed to create a series of four attention-grabbing posters which could be placed in pubs and clubs, giving people access to more information through QR codes, signposting them to support further. For example, quick links to support from local drug and alcohol treatment services or Cocaine Anonymous.

“Now we’re not saying don’t use drugs, but what we are saying is if drugs are affecting your mental health, your physical health, or your financial health, then help is available.”

Nigel Critchley



His objectives were:

- To reduce cocaine drug-related deaths.
- Raise awareness of harms associated with cocaine use.
- Signpost people to treatment and mutual aid services.
- Get harm reduction messages to the public who may not know about treatment options.
- Increase knowledge of help available as well as harm reduction messages. We prefer not to go down the prohibition route, as we understand this has a limited impact on people’s use.
- Increase uptake of people into treatment and reduce drug-related harms and ultimately drug-related deaths.

The posters are designed to raise awareness of people using cocaine recreationally or problematically, to highlight to them the risks of using cocaine, including the physical, financial and mental issues related to this use.

“The idea with the QR code is perhaps on a Monday morning, if you’ve spent all weekend using cocaine, you might realise that you haven’t got quite as much money as you did on Friday night, you might have got into trouble or be feeling slightly under the weather - and at that point you might be thinking, why am I doing this every weekend? Hang on a minute, didn’t I scan a QR code on Friday night? Let’s have a look at what it says, and then the website’s already on your phone. So we’re trying to get people when they’re more ‘questioning’.”

Nigel Critchley

Additionally, Nigel and the team recognised that people may access certain healthcare settings if they are experiencing health problems related to cocaine use. They intend to roll out the posters within the emergency department and primary care settings.



Big Plans

To ensure the messaging reaches the intended audience, GMMH plans to use the posters within the night-time economy, alongside a digital version for TV screens in healthcare settings. It is hoped that targeted advertising and placement on key websites and social media platforms will also be used. They are also considering how they can be placed at festivals.

“We want to say ‘listen, you’re an adult, you make choices every day that mould your life, and that’s entirely up to you, and we respect that’. If there are any problems, here are harm-reduction messages, such as how to reduce the risk of hepatitis C transmission. It’s about stopping yourself from having a heart attack. It’s about educating yourself about the dangers. For me, it’s about making that informed choice, and at the moment they may be making their informed choice on the information they’ve got from the peers and not from the healthcare professionals.”

Nigel Critchley

Challenges and solutions

GMMH have laid the groundwork to ensure the harm reduction materials can reach the right people by contacting the Night Time Economy Association, local licensing groups, pub watch and their commissioners. Equally, they received feedback from people with lived experience. One of the challenges for Nigel and the team has been to consider how to reach people who might be using cocaine in their home or at a friend’s house, and it is hoped that utilising social media may be a route to getting messaging to these audiences. Another consideration was ensuring the posters appealed to a varied demographic.

What’s next?

Nigel is keen that this approach is built upon even further to offer training and support to the night-time economy staff, such as ensuring security staff have an increased understanding of signpost services and the vulnerability of some people if they have been using drugs such as cocaine.

“GMMH is committed to raising awareness of the risks associated with cocaine use across Greater Manchester through social media, healthcare professionals, and the wider community. We are aware from research that cocaine related deaths have risen significantly in recent years, and people who use cocaine must understand the serious risks involved. Many individuals may not approach drug and alcohol services without first being made aware of these dangers, so finding effective ways to communicate this information is essential. Our campaign is focused on reaching people in venues where cocaine use may be more common, as well as in healthcare settings where individuals might begin to consider the health consequences. We hope this will encourage more people to contact Achieve or their local support services, whether this is for a one-off conversation, to access interventions available online or in person, or to access longer-term treatment and support. Our ultimate goal is to reduce cocaine related harm and save lives, reducing the devastating impact on individuals, families, and communities across Greater Manchester.”

Sarah Lewis, Former Head of Operations, Addictions and Homeless Services, Deaf Mental Health, GMMH

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