Tackling stigma for a safer and more inclusive Tasmania

A collective commitment from the Tasmanian AOD sector

Introduction

The Tasmanian Alcohol and Other Drug (AOD) Sector aims to minimise harm to people who use AODs, those who are close to them, and the sector workers who support them. We do this by providing holistic, person-centred and outcome-focused treatment, and by challenging stigma and discrimination.

Challenging stigma and discrimination are key priorities for the AOD Sector in Tasmania. This is documented in both the *Tasmanian Drug Strategy 2024-2029* and the *Reform Agenda for the AOD Sector in Tasmania*. These policies highlight the frequency of stigma and discrimination and the harms they cause. They also identify actions for a safer and more inclusive Tasmania.

Stigma attached to use of AODs is widespread across society, with experiences differing among individuals. Worldwide, AOD (or 'substance') use is among the most stigmatised health conditions.

Over the past twenty years, public health campaigns in Australia have successfully reduced stigma associated with mental health, physical health and wellbeing, gender and sexuality, and race.

However, ongoing experiences in the Tasmanian community show that stigma and discrimination against people who use AODs, and the people who support them, are still widespread.

As representatives of the AOD Sector in Tasmania, we will apply public health learnings from the past twenty years to tackle and eliminate the stigma and discrimination associated with AOD use in Tasmania.

Tasmania's *Charter of Health Rights and Responsibilities* sets out the rights and responsibilities of individuals seeking services and of those providing services, including:

- The right to receive health services where the service's values and beliefs and associated judgements, attitudes, opinions and behaviours do not impact on the provision of care.
- The right to receive health services regardless of gender, age, race, ethnicity, physical or intellectual disability, religion, gender identity, sexual orientation, innate variations of sex characteristics, political belief or activity, cultural belief or activity, situation, circumstance or economic or social status.

Tasmania's AOD Sector is committed to the Charter and urges all individuals to respect others when providing or accessing services.

What are stigma and discrimination?

Stigma is a negative label or set of assumptions placed on an individual or group of people due to specific characteristics, behaviours or actions. Stigma reinforces discrimination and exclusion. Someone who is experiencing stigma may feel blame, shame or guilt.

Discrimination is treating a person, or group of people, less favourably than others due to specific characteristics. Discrimination can cause low self-esteem and low self-worth; feelings of isolation, helplessness and disempowerment; exclusion from social life and workplace opportunities; chronic stress and depression. These experiences result in people feeling ashamed, shunned, worthless and hopeless.

Discrimination can compound harm by influencing substance use and leading to further discrimination.

In the AOD Sector, stigma and discrimination can extend beyond the individual to their family and friends, to communities and to health professionals working with people who use AODs.

> ***Stigma and discrimination can create barriers to people seeking and receiving help to address their alcohol and other drug use and can also hinder their ability to reconnect with the community and access opportunities such as employment. Discrimination can further compound social disadvantage and lead to social isolation and exclusion which can have negative impacts on mental and physical health.***
>
> Queensland Mental Health Commission | 2018

Stigma and discrimination can make it harder to access necessities such as health care, social support, employment and housing, resulting in psychological and physical harm. It can also make people reluctant to seek professional help for fear of being labelled, marginalised and further stigmatised.

Stigma and discrimination can occur in several forms:

1. **Structural or systemic stigma**, which flows from institutions, services, laws and policies and can occur in public institutions such as health, social and community services, in the legal system and in political commentary.
2. **Social** or **inter-personal stigma** coming from others in the community, such as the media, family and close friends, employers and the workplace, and from society in general.
3. **Self-stigma**, arising from the beliefs a person has about themself, based on their experience of systemic or inter-personal stigma.

> ***The vision of the Tasmanian Drug Strategy 2024–2029 is a Tasmania that is inclusive and safe for all people, without stigma or discrimination, where people are treated equitably and make informed health decisions when it comes to use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. It is a Tasmania where people who use AODs, their families, friends and carers, can access support where and when they need it.***
>
> Tasmanian Drug Strategy | 2024–2029

Lived experience of stigma and discrimination

Many people who use, or are dependent on, AODs face a range of other challenges, such as homelessness, unemployment, involvement with the justice system, or related health conditions.

Opinions about AODs and people who use them, vary across society. In Tasmania, individuals who use AODs report that they have experienced judgement and have been discriminated against.

Stigma and discrimination can affect:

- people who use AODs, their intimate partners, family or friends, and the wider community, across all ages, social sectors and backgrounds.
- health professionals and other AOD workers, such as general practitioners, allied health professionals, nurses, social workers, pharmacists, counsellors, case managers, housing and welfare workers, and other service providers across the AOD Sector.

It used to make me feel vulnerable in the past and quite weak, almost like I can just, like, gosh, I cannot bear today. Yeah. I just felt very small.

Lived Experience Advocate

Reducing stigma and discrimination

As a sector, we are committed to reducing stigma and discrimination by:

- **Recognising** that harms experienced by individuals who use AODs often result from factors such as trauma, abuse, mental ill health, and stigma and discrimination.
- **Using language that is person-first**, remembering that the person is more important than their AOD use, and that everyone should be respected and treated with dignity.
- **Designing and providing services** and supports that are inclusive and accessible.
- **Embedding meaningful lived experience** into all levels of the AOD Sector to enhance service design and delivery, increase staff capability, advance recruitment practices, and to ensure continual improvement.
- **Using positive, inclusive and respectful language** and speaking up when we hear remarks or see actions that are inaccurate, outdated or discriminatory.

We use an inclusive, evidence-based, harm reduction approach to support people in making informed decisions around AOD use, while supporting their health and wellbeing.

Our commitment to reduce stigma and discrimination is embodied in this Position Statement and our shared **Alcohol and Other Drugs Communications Charter**.

Our sector works in partnership with Tasmanians and communities to minimise the harms experienced by people who use AODs and by those who support or are impacted by them.

Our sector is committed to creating meaningful change by challenging and eliminating stigma and discrimination.

References

Health Complaints Commissioner Tasmania (healthcomplaints.tas.gov.au/)

National Survey of Mental Health Stigma and Discrimination (National Survey of Mental Health Stigma and Discrimination (behaviouraleconomics.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/projects/stigma-survey-report.pdf)