

Evaluation of a Pilot Project to Implement eASSIST Across the ACT ATOD Sector

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Background

The ACT has a relatively high level of AOD interventions, provided to clients, that are classified as 'assessment only'. It was hypothesised that the more extensive use of a standardised screening and brief intervention instrument would reduce the number and proportion of 'assessments only', with consequent benefits to both the agencies and their clients.

The ACT eASSIST

The ACT e-ASSIST was developed through a partnership between Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia (DASSA) and the Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA). It is an electronic version of the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST), designed by the World Health Organization.

The ASSIST is designed for primary health care providers to screen for the use of tobacco, alcohol, cannabis, cocaine, amphetamine type stimulants, sedatives, hallucinogens, inhalants, opioids and 'other' drugs.

Upon completion, the screen is scored and feedback on each drug is given to the consumer based on his or her individual scores.

DASSA adapted the ASSIST, creating the 'e-ASSIST' that can be used online or on a laptop/desktop computer.

The ACT eASSIST Stage I Pilot Project entailed six ACT ATOD agencies being trained in the use of the instrument and trialling it over the three month period December 2012 to February 2013.

Evaluation methods

Patton's Developmental Evaluation model was used as the ACT eASSIST initiative was innovative, in a state of change, markedly affected by its context and had largely unpredictable outcomes.

The expectations of the participating agencies, the challenges that they anticipated would arise, and their patterns of screening and assessment were documented prior to project commencement. Both dialogue methods and quantitative data collections delivered data facilitating pre-post implementation comparisons.

Findings: key outcomes

It has brought the sector together, discussing common challenges and having practical experience in using a common screening and brief intervention tool.

Amount of screening, brief interventions and full assessments undertaken: Little or no impact in five agencies; a marked impact in one agency (a sobering-up facility) where ACT eASSIST is now used in conjunction with AUDIT so as to identify the full range of drugs used by clients.

The instrument is valuable when used in the settings, and with the target groups, with which it is designed to be used

It is not suitable for use in residential treatment and detox settings where clients have already completed comprehensive assessments.

Findings: implementation challenges

- Some of the contents of the screening instrument were found problematic
- Lack of suitable computer resources
- Created a barrier to sound therapeutic relationships
- Extensive staff training needed
- Deciding what is the optimal stage in a client's contact with the agency to administer the screen
- Time consuming for staff
- If available for iOS-devices (especially iPads) it could have been more effectively used in outreach settings
- Difficult to use in telephone contacts with clients.

Findings: context is important

Contextual factors specific to individual agencies powerfully influenced implementation.

Findings: other sectors

Interest exists in other sectors (e.g. youth work and mental health) to use the ACT eASSIST. While this is positive, it presents management and co-ordination challenges.

Methods reference

Patton, MQ 2011, *Developmental evaluation: applying complexity concepts to enhance innovation and use*, Guilford Press, New York.

Next steps

All six participating agencies have expressed keenness to embed the ACT eASSIST into their standard operating protocols on an on-going basis.

They believe, based on the experience of the pilot project, that doing so will improve client services and reduce the number of unwarranted full assessments.

The ten-step ACT eASSIST-linked brief intervention

1. Ask client, "Are you interested in seeing how you scored on the questionnaire you just did?"
2. Give feedback about scores and associated risks use using the eASSIST Feedback report card.
3. Advise client that they can reduce their risk by reducing their substance use.
4. Responsibility – let client know that what they do with the information is up to them.
5. Ask client "Are you concerned by your score for (drug)? How?"
6. Ask client "What are the Good Things about using (drug)?"
7. Ask client "What are the Less Good Things about using (drug)?"
8. Summarise and reflect back client's discussion of their drug use.
9. Ask client "How concerned are you about the less good things about using (drug)?"
10. Give client take home materials including Self-Help strategies booklet & Feedback card.

For further information

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Further information: www.atoda.org.au/projects/act-atod-eassist/

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