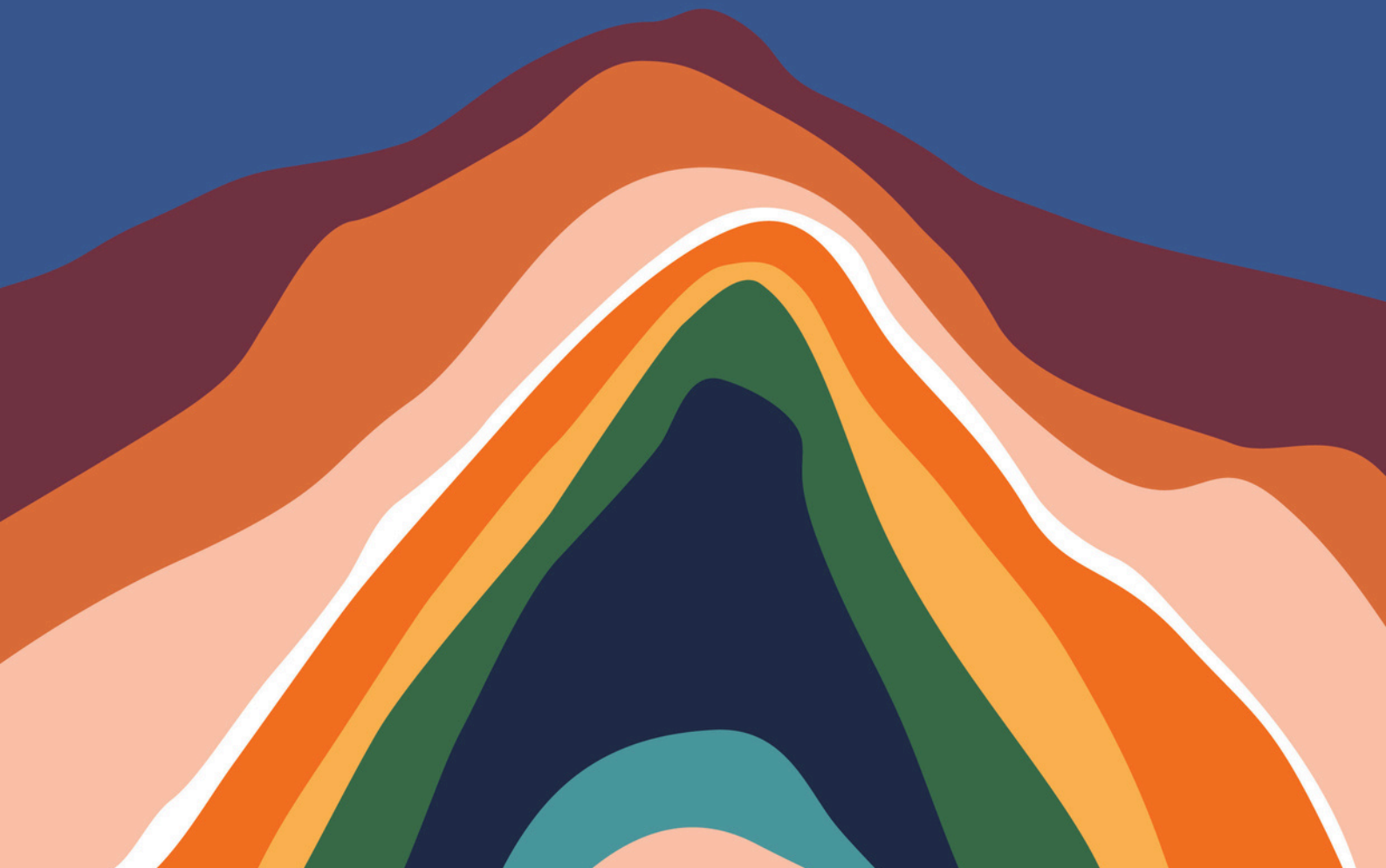
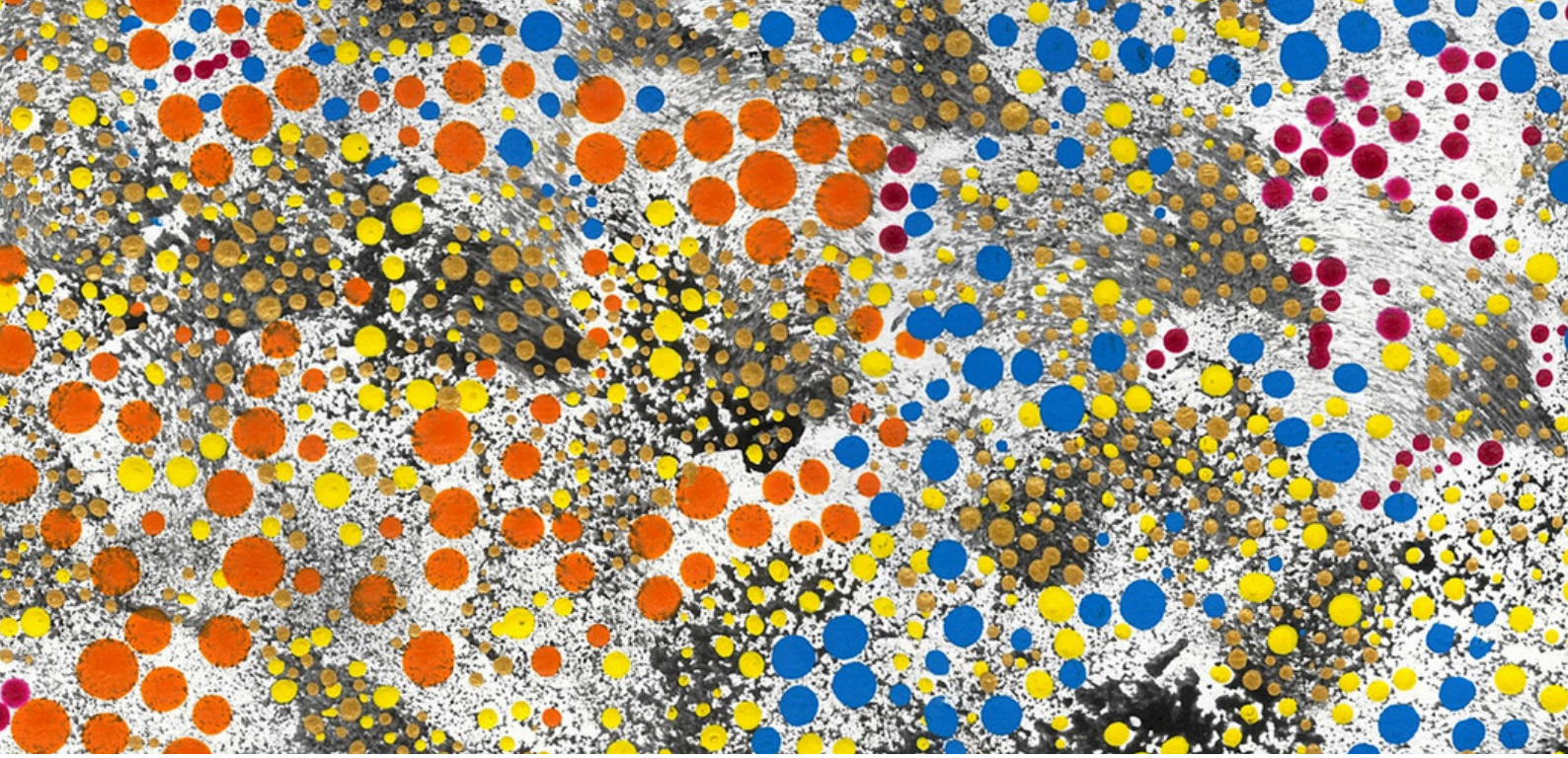
ATODA
Alcohol Tobacco & Other Drug Association ACT

September 2026
Vol 1 Issue 1

THE PEAK VIEW

WELCOME TO THE PEAK VIEW NEWSLETTER BY ATODA





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A Message From Anke

Anke van der Sterren,
Acting Chief Executive Officer

As ATODA's Acting Chief Executive Officer, I'm delighted to welcome you to the inaugural edition of The Peak View, the second of ATODA's two newsletters launched this year.

As the peak body for the ACT alcohol and other drugs sector, ATODA seeks to promote the needs and interests of our members, towards building a strong and sustainable AOD treatment and harm reduction sector in the ACT. We aim to be a leading source of information for the sector, whether it's through providing key policy and advocacy updates, sector events coverage, professional development opportunities or the latest AOD research and reports.

The Peak View is designed to feature news relevant to those with whom we are privileged to work closely, and those who may be less directly involved in ATODA's mission but who are supportive and interested in AOD and the AOD treatment and harm reduction sector.

We are aspiring to share not only our view as a peak, but also the views of our members providing AOD services to the ACT community, the views of the ACT community sector more broadly, and important insights from policy experts, researchers, and people with lived and living experience.

In this way, The Peak View is intended to be a newsletter that speaks to and on behalf of the diverse groups and individuals in our community. We hope you will freely send through your thoughts and contributions for future editions, and we will aim to regularly feature member spotlights and other news pieces.

You may notice that The Peak View design has some of the landscape colours, shapes and visual echoes of Country. This is intentional, as we recognise each day how immensely privileged we are to live and work on the land of the Ngunnawal people, the traditional custodians of the land in the ACT region. ATODA remains strongly committed to Reconciliation as an organisation, and we express our deepest respect and admiration for the extraordinary contributions that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make every single day within the alcohol and other drug sector.

I hope you enjoy diving into this first edition of The Peak View, which covers some current key issues such as the next steps for drug decriminalisation, the relocation of AOD services within the ACT and the ten year anniversary of Directions Health Services' highly successful 'Chat to Pat' community outreach program.

We also cover the recent increases in overdose rates in Australia and how important harm reduction interventions are in the fight to end overdose. Reflecting on the recent tragic deaths from overdose in Canberra, ATODA has joined other health providers and the police in reiterating key harm reduction messages, including the importance of carrying naloxone and keeping it in workplace first aid kits.

On a final note, on Monday 7 September I was delighted to attend the national forum, National Consensus for Action: a roundtable of opioid treatment in Australia. This forum brought together people with lived and living experience of using ODT, clinicians, researchers, advocates and peak bodies to align research, policy, service delivery and lived experience into a coherent national direction to improve access, quality, consistency, and resourcing of opioid dependence treatment across Australia. Through a series of facilitated discussions and consensus-building activities, participants developed an evidence-informed national advocacy statement on ODTP reform. I look forward to sharing more on this important development in our next edition of the Peak View.

Of Peak Interest

Overdose deaths reach record high

A record number of overdose deaths is a stark reminder that harm reduction remains an urgent public health priority. Every life lost represents not only a preventable death, but also creates a ripple effect of grief, trauma and loss.

Last month, the Penington Institute released *Australia's Annual Overdose Report 2026,* which is based on data collected from overdose deaths in 2024. Concerningly, the results reveal that almost 2,600 Australians lost their lives to drugs, making it the deadliest year on record and representing a 10.7% increase from the previous year. Unintentional overdose claims the lives of seven Australians every day and is among the leading causes of death for Australians in their 20s, 30s and 40s.

The most common drugs involved in overdose were opioids (1,083), stimulants (843), and benzodiazepines (696). The report also identified that there had been a five-fold increase in cocaine and heroin related deaths and a staggering fifteen-fold increase in overdose deaths relating to amphetamine type stimulants between 2001-2024.

In the early 2000s there was a shortage of heroin in Australian markets and a coinciding increase in the availability and purity of stimulants like methamphetamine. Poly drug use continues to be a concern with 18% of unintentional deaths involving two or more drugs, and almost 50% with three or more. Almost three quarters of unintentional deaths were reported in men. Overdose does not occur evenly across the population. The ongoing effects of colonisation mean that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are over four times more likely to die of overdose than other Australians.

While Victoria reported the highest proportion of overdose deaths, police in the ACT have issued warnings about potentially lethal opioid drugs circulating in Canberra, after the capital experienced seven suspected overdose deaths and multiple non-fatal overdose incidents in August 2026. This makes it critically important that people get their drugs tested at the CanTEST Health and Drug Checking service and always carry naloxone, which temporarily reverses an opioid overdose.

In 2025, the Australian Resuscitation Council released guidelines on responding to suspected overdose, recommending the use of naloxone—including by lay people—after calling 000, and alongside basic resuscitation. Naloxone is available free from CanTEST, the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA), the Civic and Woden Needle and Syringe Programs, and some pharmacies in the ACT.

ATODA encourages all health and community services to ensure that naloxone is available in first aid kits, and that staff are trained to administer it in a suspected overdose situation (more information is available here).

To read the Penington Institute's *Annual Overdose Report 2026* go to
https://www.penington.org.au/australias-annual-overdose-report-2026/

If you want to learn more about overdose and about drugs more generally, register for our last *AOD Information and Harm Reduction Training* for the year on Wednesday 21 October
https://events.humanitix.com/alcohol-and-other-drugs-information-and-harm-reduction-training-for-community-workers-in-the-act-reyenb94

31st Annual Remembrance Ceremony

for those who lost their lives to illicit drugs

When: Monday 26th October 2026
Time: 12pm-1pm, followed by lunch
Where: Weston Park, Yarralumla, ACT
At the dedicated memorial located on the right of Weston Park Road, opposite the Pescott Lane Junction

Policy priorities

AOD funding falls short in the ACT Budget 2026-27

ATODA welcomed several measures in the ACT Budget 2026–27, noting the ACT Government's investment in community services, healthcare, housing, legal assistance and domestic and family violence programs.

A particular highlight was the $23.7 million Community Sector Permanent Uplift, which will help non-government organisations improve wages, retain skilled staff and strengthen frontline services.

ATODA was disappointed at the lack of significant new investment directly targeted at the AOD sector, as the budget contains few commitments to expanding treatment services, addressing workforce shortages, improving service sustainability or increasing harm-reduction programs.

However, the budget contains several initiatives that could benefit people who use alcohol and other drug services. These include new and continuing investment in public healthcare infrastructure, expanded support for housing and homelessness services, support for LGBTQIA+ communities, expanded community legal assistance, and efforts to improve coordination between mental health, AOD, suicide prevention and primary healthcare systems.

ATODA also welcomed the Government's commitment to continue working with Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services on the establishment of an Aboriginal-led residential AOD rehabilitation service at the Watson Health Precinct.

Read the full ATODA budget analysis statement here.

Further reading:

- Supervised Consumption Rooms
- Reducing alcohol related harms in the ACT
- E-cigarettes and Tobacco
- Custodial Health and Harm Reduction
- ATODA Strategic Plan 2025-2028

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Reducing alcohol-related harms in the ACT

Reducing alcohol-related harms remains one of ATODA's key policy priorities for 2026-27.

Over the past year, ATODA has actively engaged with ACT MLAs and policymakers as the Liquor Amendment Bill 2025 progressed through the ACT Legislative Assembly's inquiry process.

ATODA supports the proposed amendments in the Bill, as actions that will provide critical protections to the health and safety of people who consume alcohol via online sales and delivery, and to their friends and families.

As part of this work, ATODA provided a formal submission to the committee inquiry and participated in a public hearing, advocating for measured, evidence-based reforms that support public health and reduce alcohol-related harms across the Canberra community. Following the inquiry, the ACT Government released its response in June 2026, outlining its position on the committee's recommendations.

The Bill will now return to the Legislative Assembly for debate and a final vote. ATODA will continue to engage constructively with decision-makers to ensure that alcohol policy in the ACT is informed by evidence and focused on improving health, wellbeing and community safety.

We look forward to updating members on the outcome of the legislation and its implications for the alcohol and other drug sector in future editions of The Peak View.

Read ATODA's submission here.

ATODA's acting CEO Anke van der Sterren (right) and Policy and Research Manager Elisabeth Yar (left) recently met with the newly appointed ACT Health Minister Marisa Paterson (middle) to discuss a range of AOD policy priorities, including alcohol-related harms.

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Release of the report on the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia

In September the Chair of the House of Representatives' Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Disability released a report from an inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia.

ATODA made a submission to the inquiry and was referenced in the report in relation to improving access to drug-checking services and to bolstering cross-sectoral collaboration to address co-occurring issues and needs, particularly in relation to homelessness. The full report can be read here.

Decriminalisation: Looking back; moving forward

Two years after the introduction of illicit drug decriminalisation in the ACT, evaluation findings indicated that the reform was successfully achieving its primary goal: diverting people away from the criminal justice system and towards health-based responses.

The independent evaluation of the Drugs of Dependence Amendment Act found that nearly 70% of consumer drug offences were diverted over the first two years of operation. Significantly, where no other offence was involved, more than 96% of consumer drug offences resulted in diversion rather than criminal penalties.

The findings reinforce the ACT's commitment to treating problematic drug use as a health and social issue rather than a criminal one. However, they also highlight an important reality: decriminalisation alone does not automatically increase engagement with treatment and support services.

While some concerns were raised prior to implementation that decriminalisation could place additional pressure on the alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment sector, the evidence to date suggests otherwise. The evaluation found no measurable increase in demand for treatment services and relatively low rates of onward referral from the Illicit Drug Diversion Program. Just 4.5% of people diverted were referred on to further treatment or support.

These findings align closely with ATODA's own Qualitative Review of the Impact of the Drugs of Dependence Amendment Act on the ACT AOD Sector, which documented sector experiences before and after implementation. Service providers consistently reported that decriminalisation had not resulted in noticeable changes to client numbers or demand for services during the first two years of operation.

ATODA's review highlights several opportunities to strengthen the legislation's impact. These include expanding the range of services available through diversion pathways, improving public education and communication about the reforms, and ensuring that people experiencing the greatest drug-related harms are able to benefit from the changes. Better community understanding of what decriminalisation does and does not do remains an important part of maximising the reform's effectiveness.

The ACT's experience provides an important example of evidence-informed drug policy in practice. While the results are encouraging, they also demonstrate that meaningful reform is an ongoing process. The challenge now is to ensure that diversion pathways are as effective and accessible as possible and that the benefits of reform reach those who need them most.

Want to know more? Read the full reports:

Ritter A, O'Reilly K, Barrett L, Blunden H, Gough C, and Olsen A. Final report on the Evaluation of the Operation of the ACT Drugs of Dependence (Personal Use) Amendment Act 2022. 2026. ACT Government: Canberra. https://www.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/3074945/Final-Report-Evaluation-of-the-ACT-Drugs-of-Dependence-Personal-Use-Amendment-Act.pdf

Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drug Association ACT (ATODA). Qualitative review of the impact of the Drugs of Dependence Amendment Act on the ACT AOD Sector: "A step in the right direction". 2026. ATODA: Canberra. https://www.atoda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/ATODA-Qualitative-Review-of-DODA_final250626-1.pdf

Welcoming AOD health services to our suburbs

Substance use affects all parts of Canberra.

On any given day, there are individuals and families across the region who are experiencing harms from alcohol and other drug use. But too many people fail to get the support they need, with stigma compounding the many other barriers on the path to accessing appropriate treatment and harm reduction services.

Stigma is a problem, first and foremost, because it denies people equal humanity and predicates the way they are treated on their personal traits or behaviours. Furthermore, it can discourage people from seeking out support when they most need it. Indeed, many people approach a service only after experiencing a crisis, often after many years of struggling with the impacts of alcohol and other drug use, with all the compounding effects on physical and mental health, relationships and finances.

While there is a real temptation to place AOD services out of sight and out of mind, best practice is to locate services, wherever possible, within residential communities. This allows clients to maintain connections with everyday life, reduces barriers to seeking support and normalises alcohol and other drug treatment as a health service on par with other specialist services.

A Sax Institute study on community impacts of residential alcohol and drug rehabilitation services, commissioned by the NSW Government (2023), demonstrated that neighbourhood fears around falling property values or spikes in local crime are statistically unfounded. An assumption around the negative impacts of drug treatment facilities in suburban settings were largely unfounded or did not materialise in the long term, while a number of positive impacts were recorded.

The process of relocating Arcadia House, Canberra's long-established alcohol and other drug rehabilitation service, from its ageing Bruce facility, will require communities to engage constructively in consultation processes and focus on practical solutions, while recognising the value of providing quality health services in welcoming community settings.

Acting CEO Anke van der Sterren contributed an opinion editorial to the Canberra Times on this topic. You can read it here.

Drug use in the age of longevity

The International Day of Older Persons falls on the 1st of October. This year, the theme is "The Age of Longevity: Rethinking Systems for Longer Lives".

When we think about the health needs of an aging population, we are often focused on chronic disease and age-related conditions. But how often do we consider the needs of older people who use drugs? The cohort of people who are entering the aged care system today came-of-age during the countercultural revolutions of the 1960s, a time when illicit drug use burgeoned. Improved healthcare and four decades of harm reduction in Australia, means that people who use illicit drugs are living longer. But there are real questions about how well-equipped our aged care system is to respond to the needs of older people who use drugs, including their right to receive non-stigmatising healthcare and appropriate forms of medication such as adequate pain relief and, where required, opioid dependence treatment. People in residential care settings deserve access to the full range of treatment and harm reduction interventions.

Check out the Penington Institute's Safer Using Series – Older People and Drug Use

Across the Sector

10 year celebration of Directions' Mobile Health Services

ATODA was pleased to attend the 10 year celebration of Directions' Mobile Health Services. Congratulations to Directions Health Services CEO Bronwyn Hendry (pictured below, right) and the whole team on this impressive milestone!

It was wonderful to hear about the positive impact that Chat to Pat (and more recently Mini Pat) has on the community.

It was really positive to have the then ACT Health Minister Rachel Stephen-Smith in attendance.

ATODA acknowledges Minister Stephen-Smith's incredible support for the ACT AOD sector over 7 years and welcomes Minister Marisa Paterson to the portfolio.

To find out more about Chat to Pat or to check where the van will be each day, click here.

NAIDOC Week 2026 – 50 years of being deadly

The ATODA team had a great time attending the official NAIDOC Week event organised by Canberra Community Services. It was wonderful to see so many people from the community gathering to recognise and celebrate the extraordinary history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This year's anniversary theme '50 Years of Deadly' spoke to the power and legacy of NAIDOC as an enduring platform and voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from many different groups and nations.

From the Workers' Group

The ACT AOD Workers' Group provides a monthly forum for representatives from AOD services to meet in person, share updates and information, hear from guest speakers on key topics of interest, build intra-sectoral partnerships and showcase new programs and intervention types.

In recent months we've had the opportunity, as a group, to visit CanTEST and the Needle Syringe Program (NSP) in Civic, as well as the Sobering Up Shelter.

Key issues that have recently been raised in the Workers' Group include the rise in peptide use, the impact of the temporary Moore St closure on services and programs, and working with neurodiverse service users.

If you would like to know more about the Workers' Group, please contact ATODA.

Alliance Update

What's been happening at the ACT AOD & Mental Health Alliance?

ACT AOD & Mental Health Alliance

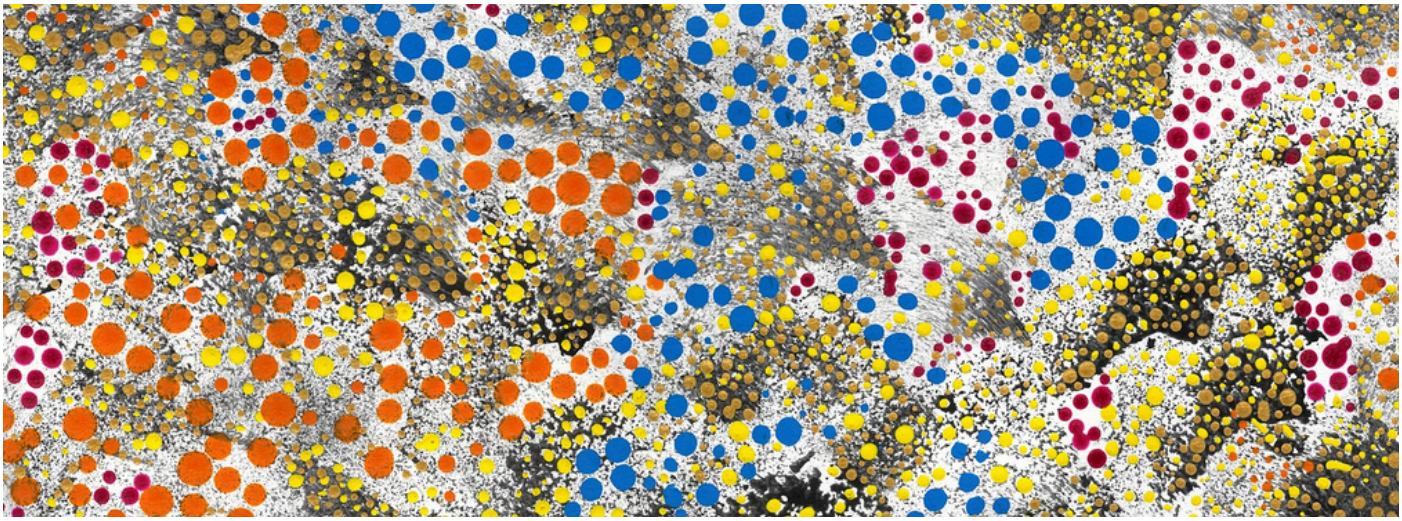
Tom Urban, Policy and Engagement Manager

The ACT AOD & Mental Health Alliance, the joint ATODA and MHCC ACT partnership funded by the ACT Government, is well into its second year of building stronger connections across the two sectors.

We were happy to present a briefing to Minister Paterson, the new ACT Minister for Health and Minister for Mental Health. Client Journey Modelling continues as a key part of our advocacy work. We are working with a number of organisations to map their clients' journeys through the system, including the gaps between AOD and mental health services. Interviews are done and now being worked through thematically, with the findings set to feed directly into our policy work on co-occurring service provision.

All four Communities of Practice are running through 2026, bringing students and early career workers, outreach staff, and team leaders and managers together across the sector. Our Learning Circles have just started their second intake, and the Bus Tour Program has now taken 14 tours through the sector. We've also added a number of additional workshops to our Foundations of Co-Occurring Practice and Motivational Interviewing offerings. Our three-part Reflective Practice Short Course is due to commence on 29 September, with only a few spots left. Book via the Alliance Humanitix page.

Research Signals



Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander allied health co-workers

A possible role in advancing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health and well-being

NAIDOC Week 2026, held from 5–12 July, carried the theme “50 Years of Deadly”, marking five decades of celebrating Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures, leadership, survival, resistance and strength.

This article, co-authored by Jawoyn woman Kylie Stothers, was featured in Wiley’s NAIDOC 2026 multi-disciplinary research collection.

The authors argue that “Alternatives to the traditional allied health service and workforce models will be the only way to provide culturally responsive, equitable, sustainable and multidisciplinary services.”

Allied health services in rural and remote Australia need to move beyond conventional workforce models and recognise the combined clinical and cultural expertise needed to deliver safe, effective care.

The proposed Co-Worker role would support allied health professionals while also providing cultural brokerage, community knowledge and leadership, helping services engage more respectfully and meaningfully with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The paper highlights the need for proper training pathways, remuneration, supervision and policy recognition so these roles are valued and sustainable and calls for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander leadership within clinical teams and services to be “appropriately increased, recognised, and renumerated,” in order to improve equity, cultural safety and outcomes for communities.

ATODA recognises the significant contributions of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples to the alcohol and other drug (AOD) sector in the ACT and beyond.

The expertise of First Nations peoples, including researchers, policymakers, practitioners, community leaders and people with lived and living experience, combines tens of thousands of years of cultural knowledge with remarkable resilience, innovation and leadership. This knowledge and expertise continue to shape stronger, more culturally responsive and effective approaches to AOD policy, practice, research and service delivery.

Read the article Cairns A, Stothers K, Gibson P, et al., *The Australian Journal of Rural Health*, 2025, 33(5): e70096, doi: 10.1111/ajr.70096

Learn more about ATODA’s commitment to Reconciliation at https://www.atoda.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/Reconciliation-Action-Plan-Template-reduced.pdf

What we've been reading...

Australia's unique vaping reforms: first results from a repeated cross-sectional study in South Australia

Dono J, Ettridge K, Ziesing S, et al., *Tobacco Control*, Published Online 12 June 2026, doi: 10.1136/tc-2025-060005

This South Australian longitudinal study of smoking and vaping behaviours found a statistically significant decline in in e-cigarette use in 2024, particularly in young people who had never smoked tobacco products. These findings seem to suggest that regulatory reforms restricting the import, sale and supply of e-cigarettes for non-therapeutic use had an immediate impact.

Vaporized Nicotine Products for Smoking Cessation Among People Experiencing Social Disadvantage

Courtney R, Howard B, Barker D, et al., *Annals of Internal Medicine*, 2025,178(8):1085-94, doi: 10.7326/ANNALS-24-03531

This NDARC study found that e-cigarettes are a promising treatment option that leads to "higher quit rates than nicotine gum or lozenges for those experiencing social disadvantage."

Changes in heroin-related ambulance attendances following the introduction of a medically supervised injecting room in Victoria, Australia

Killian JJ, Rowland B, McGrath M, et al., *International Journal of Drug Policy*, Published Online 7 July 2026, doi: 10.1016/j.drugpo.2026.105405

The opening of the MSIR in the Melbourne suburb of Richmond was associated with a significant and sustained reduction in the rate of heroin-related ambulance attendances within its catchment area. The findings demonstrate the harm reduction value of supervised drug consumption facilities but also suggests that this value may be geographically limited and that ensuring facilities are accessible to the broadest possible population will enhance utility and effectiveness. This has implications for any future drug consumption facility in the ACT.

Mental health predictors of treatment engagement and completion in substance use disorder treatment

Thal S, Riddell H, Daws C, et al., J*ournal of Substance Use and Addiction Treatment*, Published Online 8 July 2026, doi: 10.1016/j.josat.2026.210066

This study finds that identifying and supporting service users during periods of elevated stress, and sustaining engagement among those with elevated suicide risk, can improve completion of AOD treatment.

Behavioural effects and naloxone effectiveness with new synthetic opioids

Nielsen S, Silva JP, Jones JD, et al., *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 2026 , 45(1):e70040. doi: 10.1111/dar.70040

This study examines the written evidence of the effectiveness of naloxone against 13 synthetic opioids of varying potencies. It finds that naloxone is effective to reverse acute poisoning for almost all of the opioids examined, with naloxone doses (when reported) typically representing doses in the usual therapeutic range, suggesting that naloxone remains a key overdose reversal agent and harm reduction tool in drug markets where nitazenes are emerging.

What we've been listening to...

Driving Under the Influence with Dr. Tom Arkell
Reefer Medness: The Podcast, E64, 9 February 2021

One from the archives: this 2021 podcast episode is once again topical with changes to drug driving laws for people using medicinal cannabis in NSW and proposed changes in the ACT.

Use and harms of gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) with Amy Peacock and Krista Siefried
Addiction Audio, S4: E22, 12 June 2026

In this episode, Dr Elle Wadsworth talks to Dr Amy Peacock about her article on trends in gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) use, harms and treatment in Australia, and to Dr Krista Siefried, about her article on emergency department presentations, hospitalisations and police seizure data related to GHB in NSW.

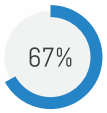
Exploring the data

AOD treatment services annual report 2024-25

There were 6,686 closed treatment episodes at AOD treatment services in the ACT in 2024-25

44.5%
involved alcohol as the primary drug of concern

The main treatment type was information and education only (33.3%), followed by counselling (24.2%)



had expected or planned completion of treatment

National Drug Strategy Household Survey 2025: Tobacco, e-cigarettes and other nicotine insights

Australia-wide, daily tobacco smoking **dropped** to 5.6% in 2025, down from 8.3% in 2022-23

Australia-wide, daily e-cigarette use **stabilised** from 2022-23 (3.5%) to 2025 (3.6%)

Health-related service needs of specialist homelessness services (SHS) clients

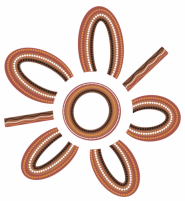
In 2024–25, around 1 in 4 (24% or 69,000) SHS clients in Australia identified health-related reasons for seeking support

- 14,900 clients identified problematic drug or substance use
- 7,700 clients identified problematic alcohol use

Health-related services were among the most commonly referred service types

- around 26,600 clients needed health/medical services
- over 8,000 needed drug/alcohol counselling

Australia's health 2026



The proportion of First Nations people aged 15 and over who:

- consume alcohol at risky levels has **declined** (from 48% to 33% between 2010 and 2022–23)

- smoke tobacco daily has **declined** (from 37% to 29% between 2018–19 and 2022–23).

ATODA
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Get The Peak View in your inbox six times a year

and

Sign up to receive ATODA's fortnightly PeakPulse emails

Have a story that you'd like to share with the ACT AOD sector?

Submissions are welcome via communications@atoda.org.au.

ATODA
Alcohol Tobacco & Other Drug Association ACT

ATODA proudly acknowledges the Ngunnawal peoples as Traditional Custodians of the land we work on and recognises all other peoples or families with connections to the ACT and region. ATODA acknowledges, respects and celebrates the continuing cultures and contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the life of the ACT and region. We respect and value the contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to the alcohol, tobacco and other drug sector.

Artwork: Unspoken History, Map of Pain by Sharon (2020). To learn more, click here.

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ATODA is the peak body representing the alcohol and other drug (AOD) sector in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT).