PATHWAYS TO WITHDRAWAL MANAGEMENT IN GUELPH: EXPERIENCES OF SERVICE USERS

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Patricia Altass*, Alberto Salguero**, Ceilidh Wilson**, & Anne Bergen***
* Project Manager, ** Intern, *** Postdoctoral Fellow
The Research Shop, University of Guelph

Our research shows that finding a pathway to withdrawal management (detox) services can be challenging for Guelph residents. The researchers interviewed 14 participants to explore their lived experiences in accessing detox services. Thematic analysis of interviews provided a detailed description of barriers to accessing services, which can be physical, social or financial. Interviewees also shared with the researchers how they have accessed detox, the support structures for accessing detox, alternatives methods of detox, and their recommendations to improve access to services in Guelph. The one recommendation strongly stressed by most participants is the need for Guelph to have its own detox centre or services.

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INTRODUCTION

RESEARCH GOALS
The purpose of this project is to explore the lived experiences of Guelph residents who have accessed or have faced barriers to accessing withdrawal management services. The goal of this project is to better understand the supports and barriers that may exist for community members in accessing these services. Gaining a better understanding of the barriers and supports for accessing withdrawal management services from the perspective of service users will provide essential information to inform policy and planning as well as improve service delivery.

KEY TERMS
Withdrawal management services may be defined as:\(^1\):
“Assistance with voluntary withdrawal from alcohol and/or other drugs to clients who are under the influence of these substances and/or in withdrawal or otherwise in crisis directly related to these substances.”

Participants in this study most commonly referred to withdrawal management programs as detox centres and/or detox programs, and this terminology is reflected throughout the report. In Ontario, there are three levels of withdrawal management services, ranging from support for more mild symptoms, to fully medically supervised inpatient withdrawal. A detailed overview of the withdrawal management service levels in Ontario can be found at http://www.drugandalcoholhelpline.ca/Search/ServiceTypes. A “withdrawal management centre” or “detox centre”, as discussed by some participants, would likely be a Level II withdrawal management service, suitable for “clients on methadone; and clients being tapered from benzodiazepines or narcotics”.\(^1\)

BACKGROUND
There is currently no withdrawal management center in Guelph, Ontario, nor are any forms of mobile withdrawal management services provided to residents living in Guelph. Therefore, people living in Guelph who are seeking withdrawal management services must travel to a city centre that offers such services. Residents of Guelph are most likely to obtain detox services from the Kitchener service location, which is part of Guelph’s Local Health Integration Network. However, Guelph residents may also access withdrawal management services in other cities, such as Hamilton, Toronto or Owen Sound.
This project is part of a multi-stage research project investigating how people in Guelph-Wellington get to withdrawal management services. First, a literature scan was conducted to investigate the effect of geographic proximity of withdrawal management services on treatment for addictions. Next, informational interviews were conducted with services providers assisting clients who require assistance with withdrawal management services to acquire information with respect to barriers surrounding pathways to withdrawal management for people living in Guelph-Wellington, Ontario.

**METHODS**

For this study, qualitative interviewing methods were used where open-ended questions asked participants to describe events experienced in relation to accessing or attempting to access withdrawal management services (see interview script in Appendix A). Qualitative methods were used in order to gather in-depth, descriptive information that highlights lived experiences. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were conducted by Research Shop graduate student interns. Participants were individuals from the city of Guelph who self identified as having either accessed withdrawal management services in the past or having faced barriers to accessing withdrawal management services. All participants were at least 19 years of age. Front line community workers at the Guelph Community Health Centre and affiliated organizations assisted in recruiting participants by distributing an information flyer and helping to arrange for interview meeting times. In addition, snowball-sampling techniques were used, where participants informed others of the opportunity to participate. Participants received a $20 grocery store gift card as a thank you for contributing to the project. All interviews took place at the Guelph Community Health Centre with only the researcher and interviewee present. Each interview was audio recorded and reviewed by the researchers, who used thematic analysis to identify common issues and experiences. Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. While thematic analysis is a flexible approach to qualitative analysis that can provide in-depth and complex descriptive information, findings may not be generalized to an entire population. The researchers worked collaboratively to analyze the data and write the final report. The University of Guelph Research Ethics Board approved this protocol.

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1 While researchers hoped to include Wellington County residents in this research, there was no response to the recruitment flyers distributed within Wellington County (i.e., at the Fergus Community Resource Centre and at the Mount Forest Family Health Team).
RESULTS: KEY FINDINGS

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEWS
Of the 14 interviews conducted, nine participants reported having accessed detox services at least once within the past 1-10 years. All of the participants were from the city of Guelph. There were six men and eight women, ranging in age from 19 to 58 years of age. Most of the interviewees who had accessed detox services while residing in Guelph had gone to the Kitchener location, with two reporting having accessed a detox program in Toronto, and one in Owen Sound. For those who did not access detox services while they were residing in Guelph, reasons included: a lack of awareness of community programs and supports to assist with transportation costs, experiences of stigma, their belief that detox would not be a good fit for them, as well as returning to drugs after being unable to get into a detox centre due to program capacity. Satisfaction with day treatment options and having accessed a detox program while living in another city before moving to Guelph were other reasons cited for having not accessed services.

METHODS OF ACCESSING DETOX SERVICES
Among those participants who accessed detox services in Kitchener, the most common transportation method reported was taking an inter-city bus. In situations where individuals did not have money to pay for a bus ticket, in most cases they were able to acquire a ticket or money for a ticket either from a friend, a family member, or from a community program, organization or shelter. Individuals also reported having friends and/or family members drive them to a detox centre. In cases where individuals were admitted to detox services directly from an emergency department, they were either taken to the detox centre by ambulance or by a police officer. It was also reported that police officers have driven participants to detox from temporary custody, as well as upon contact in the community when participants were under the influence of drugs. Participants also accessed detox services by having a community member with lived experience and/or who was participating in a support group (such as Alcoholics Anonymous) drive them to a detox centre. Other participants took taxis, which they either paid for themselves, or in one case, which was paid for by the detox centre itself. Participants who had accessed detox services several times often used multiple means of getting there.

SUPPORTS FOR ACCESSING DETOX SERVICES
Community service providers and front line workers who provided bus tickets to assist participants in getting to detox centers were overwhelmingly viewed as a positive and helpful resource. In some cases these individuals also contacted detox services on the participants’ behalf.
The good thing about (front line worker) is she was never judgmental or anything. There was no stigma or anything to face there. She knew, you didn’t even have to tell her, she knew. Professionals providing physical and mental health supports and services in the community, such as doctors, counselors and front line workers were highlighted as important sources of information about detox services. In some cases, these professionals made the initial contact with detox services on behalf of participants. Ontario Works staff provided information about detox services to some participants, as well. Participants also highlighted family and friends as important sources of information and emotional support.

BARRIERS TO ACCESSING DETOX SERVICES
Several barriers to accessing detox services from Guelph were also discussed by the participants. These barriers included challenges of a physical, social, or financial nature.

Physical Barriers
The distance between Guelph and the nearest detox centre, which is located in Kitchener, was reported as a challenge for those attempting to access detox services. Having to arrange transportation to other cities was said to be difficult due to a lack of available supports, as well as the cost of transportation.

… an addict or an alcoholic, they don’t want to sit and wait for the Greyhound, or have to wait for (a front line community worker) to be available and stuff like that… I really think there should be something more available in Guelph.

Most of the social service and health programs and supports in Guelph are accessible only during certain hours, usually weekdays 9am-5pm. The gap in service between 5pm-9am, as well as weekends, was identified as barrier for those who required assistance or support to get to a detox center.

… a day or two doesn’t work for an addict, you know?… instead of waiting I would just go get more drugs, instead of trying to do the right way I would just cave in and go buy the drugs so I wasn’t sick [from withdrawal]…

Waiting time to be admitted was frequently mentioned as a barrier to accessing detox services. The overall capacity of detox programs was reported as a barrier, especially among female users. Two of the participants reported they had contacted detox centres in the past but could not get a bed.
I have been referred to (a particular) detox by members of AA and my addictions counselor but they don’t have a bed all the time… it has been twice over the last three years. There’s a limited amount of space… Sometimes a long time (to get admitted into detox)… sometimes I would call every day for a week… I would call and call and there wouldn’t be a bed available, so I wouldn’t go.

Social Barriers
Stigma, or the fear of people finding out about a drug addiction problem, was highlighted as a reason to put off going to or avoid detox services all together. For example, one participant said:

I didn’t want to be one of those people. You know the people who have problems…

For those who have family and/or work related responsibilities, entering a full time detox program or other residential service can be impractical, if not impossible.

I can’t go for three weeks at the drop of a hat… not everybody’s in that position to be able to say to their work ‘oh Friday afternoon I’m not going to be in for three weeks’… And I don’t have anybody here and [my son] is old enough now that he could be a latch key kid, but that’s not ideal. I wouldn’t feel good about that.

Some participants expressed feeling more comfortable having someone else call the detox centre on their behalf, such as a front line worker, counsellor or doctor. Participants also expressed that increased promotion of and information about the availability of detox services by health professionals would be an asset for those unfamiliar with treatment options.

Financial Barriers
Financial barriers were mentioned mostly in connection with participants’ inability to pay for transportation from Guelph to the detox centre in another city, and back. Some users also talked about challenges in calling long distance numbers (to access detox centres) either because they do not pay for that feature on their phones or could not afford a payphone.

ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF DETOX
Some of the participants discussed alternative strategies used to detox, other than through formal detox services. Several of the participants discussed detoxing on their own at home, with
participants describing their experience of home detoxing without support as very unfavorable, as indicated by this participant:

*It was horrible, man…it was not good. I thought I was dying, literally.*

Another participant also expressed some of the challenges faced while attempting to detox at home.

*I’ve tried doing it alone and it’s terrible. It’s suicidal, it’s depression, crying, it’s vomiting – it’s bad.*

The lack of structure available at home and the reported ease in returning to drug use were highlighted as key struggles when attempting a home detox.

*When you don’t have that structure or you don’t have that support system or structure in place, it’s just easy to walk out your door.*

The additional challenge of experiencing withdrawal symptoms and detoxing, unsupported by medications or treatment programs while in jail, was also discussed by a few participants. One individual expressed feeling there was no other option while in jail but to withdraw from drugs, stating:

*No choice but to detox. There’s drugs in jail, but they’re ridiculously expensive and not very good.*

One participant described a positive experience with detoxing at home with the aid of doctor-prescribed medications. For this individual, the process of detoxification was made more manageable due to the medication prescribed to assist in and help alleviate symptoms of detoxification.

*Through a doctor…he prescribed something through the pharmacist that we picked up and I can’t remember, but I think one must have been a Valium, one was a nausea pill, one must be something else and they did it at home and it took about three or four days.*

**RECOMMENDATIONS FROM PARTICIPANTS**

Many of the participants had ideas of how to improve the current detoxification services for individuals living in the Guelph area. There was an overwhelming response from participants that Guelph needs additional facilities or services to help those who are seeking withdrawal management services, as this participant states:
It’s a confusing process and it’s a foolish time-racing process because they don’t have a detox here in Guelph… they wouldn’t have to have those extra additional steps and the process if they had a detox in Guelph.

The need and value of a local detox centre and services was highlighted by several participants, with a focus on those who may not be able to get to another city to access services.

*If they had a detox or a withdrawal management within the city [Guelph] it would fill.*

Participants also suggested that a “Dry House”, or a program that participants could go to immediately after leaving detox services, would be an asset.

*Open a dry house here and take them all when they come out of detox… this would give them a place of safety until they get into treatment (rehab).*

Another recommendation was for doctors to be able to prescribe an at-home kit of certain medications to assist with the detoxification process:

*If doctors knew, like he knows that I had a problem with it, that he could say oh here, you seem sincere so I’m going to give you the kit. And you take a week or two weeks off work and you detox and you get clean. And I would do that in a minute right now if they would do that to me.*

Other participants emphasized the importance of accessible and available local services, particularly in terms of hours of operation. The need for additional supports during weekend hours as well as overnight services was highlighted.

*Lives don’t shut off at 5PM… the biggest barrier for sure is that gap from 5pm-8am or the weekends.*

Another suggestion offered is to have support workers who physically go out into the community and help individuals by providing them with the proper information about services and supports that currently exist.

*I think if you’re helping drug addicts, you have to actually be out on the street and helping them. You have to go where they are because they’re probably not going to come to you if they’re using.*

**CONCLUSION**

Many of the participants shared that detox services are a valuable resource and an important step in addressing drug related issues. However, most felt there is still much room for
improvement for withdrawal management services in the Guelph area. By interviewing individuals who have personally experienced the current options in this area, we have included the voices of the people who are most directly impacted by withdrawal management services. Based on participants’ suggestions for more accessibility, availability, and improved services, it is evident that there is a desire for more services in Guelph, and also that these services would be heavily used and appreciated.

LIMITATIONS OF THE REPORT
The findings of this report reflect the views and opinions of the 14 participants, and as such do not fully reflect the experience of all those accessing or seeking to access detox services in Guelph and beyond. Generally, the qualitative themes highlighted in this report are intended to be a starting point for discussion on accessing withdrawal management services from Guelph. This report does not reflect a comprehensive needs assessment, and findings may not reliably be generalized beyond the current sample.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Note that these questions are guidelines for a semi-structured interview format. Probes may be used to clarify participant answers.

1. For this study we are looking at people’s experiences of getting to withdrawal management services – in other words, programs that assist with detoxification from alcohol and/or drugs. Have you attended any of these withdrawal management services?
   a. (If yes) – When did you attend and for how long did you access this service?
   b. (If no) – (skip to question #4)
2. Was this your first time accessing withdrawal management services? If not, how many times have you accessed these services?
3. What were your expectations of withdrawal management services before you attended? What were your hopes in attending?
4. When you decided to access (or attempt to access) withdrawal management services, what steps did you take to attend?
   a. How did you know where to go?
   b. How long did it take between when you decided to go and when you actually accessed services?
   c. Who did you contact first?
   d. Were any steps necessary before you attended?
   e. How did you get there? Did you require any transportation support? If so, how did you access this support?
5. Have you detoxed in any other way? I.e. at home, in hospital, when incarcerated, at a mental health hospital?
6. In your recollection, did you access the Emergency Department for treatment or support in the 6 months prior to accessing (or attempting to access) withdrawal management services?
7. Do you have any recommendations for how access to withdrawal management services may be improved?
8. In what city/town do you live?
9. What is your age?