What is this research about?

Women with substance use issues who are pregnant or parenting have needs that are not being met by traditional addiction services. Aboriginal mothers are up against even more challenges. In Canada, Aboriginal women face disproportional rates of poverty, discrimination, harassment, violence, inadequate housing, mental health issues, loss of child custody, and difficulty in accessing appropriate treatment.

There is an urgent need for integrated, women-only, culturally-appropriate treatments that are welcoming and flexible, and that aim to reduce the harmful effects of substance use on women and their children.

An example of an integrated treatment program is New Choices in Hamilton, which offers a one-stop shop for women-only services related to pregnancy, parenting, child development, and childcare. Sheway, in Vancouver, is similar but emphasizes Aboriginal culture and healing practices. Studies suggest these types of programs are helpful in improving engagement and health outcomes, but more rigorous research needs to be done.

What did the researchers do?

Researchers in Hamilton and Saskatchewan reviewed the evidence on integrated treatment programs and Aboriginal treatment programs, and offered recommendations for future research and practice.

What did the researchers find?

Concerns with current treatment programs for Aboriginal women include:

- There is limited access to culturally-sensitive services;
- There aren't any gender-specific treatment services in northern Canada or the territories;
- All too often, women are referred to residential programs that are far away from their families. They end up relapsing after returning home, and they don't receive any/ enough aftercare.

What you need to know:

There is an urgent need for women-only, culturally-sensitive, one-stop shop treatment programs that:
- Address trauma;
- Include prenatal care or therapeutic child care;
- Help women reclaim their identity as Aboriginal women; and
- Focus on the resiliency and strengths found within each woman, her family, and her community.
How can you use this research?

Clinicians and healthcare providers may want to consider the following when striving to improve existing treatment programs or develop new ones.

Treatment programs for Aboriginal women with substance use issues need to help them reclaim their identity as Aboriginal women by:

- Providing access to traditional healing practices and ceremonies, such as sacred dances, sweat lodges, talking circles, four circles, etc.
- Finding connections between women’s present-day lives and the roles that Aboriginal women are traditionally honoured for: life-giver, care-giver, observer, teacher.

Treatment programs also need to ensure that clinicians:

- Recognize the impacts of trauma;
- Are empathetic, especially regarding the loss of child custody;
- Communicate openly;
- Support the link to Aboriginal culture;
- Are non-judgmental, especially regarding prostitution and mothering practices;
- Can act as positive role models; and
- Acknowledge the past and help their clients move forward with healthier relationships, skills, and ties to their community.

Limitations and next steps

The available studies that were reviewed by the authors are of limited quality in terms of design and methodology. Researchers may be interested in contributing to the evaluation and outcome data of existing Aboriginal community-based treatment programs.

About the researchers

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Keywords

Aboriginal, women, substance use, children, treatment, pregnancy, parenting.

This Research Snapshot is based on an article that has been critically appraised for quality and susceptibility to bias.

Evidence Exchange Network (EENet; formerly OMHAKEN) has partnered with the Knowledge Mobilization Unit at York University to produce Research Snapshots in the field of mental health and addictions in Ontario. EENet actively promotes the use of research evidence in decision-making by supporting engagement and connections between researchers and mental health and addictions stakeholders across Ontario. EENet works to develop targeted KT products and tools and supports interactive exchanges. It is supported by the Ontario Government and the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. This summary was written by Lindsay Kochen.

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