UBC SCHOOL OF POPULATION AND PUBLIC HEALTH

SPPH 550(3): Public Health Approaches to Substance Use and Addictions

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Purpose:

Public health strategies aimed at preventing and treating problematic substance use are a defining point of recovery for individuals and societies. Addictions and substance use is inherently a multidisciplinary field and successful public health approaches will likely be those grounded on this premise. Our understanding of this public health issue requires considering the individual and social environmental factors as they contribute to develop, sustain, prevent, treat and manage substance use and its related problems.

How problematic substance use is defined varies between individuals, disciplines, communities and time periods. For example, in the past addictions were seen as an indicator of lack of will and determination, while it is now considered a chronic relapsing disease that affects millions of people in the world. However, among a community these two concepts will co-exist and this will be reflected in the public policies. Fascinatingly, regardless of scientific evidence, there is a vast irrational component in our strategies to prevent and treat substance use and related problems.

The general aim of this course is to engage students in a critical examination of public health strategies regarding substance use and related problems, in the context of a multidisciplinary approach.

Learning Objectives

On completion of the course, students are expected to be able to:

1. Critically analyze examples of public health responses aimed at preventing, treating and managing substance use and related problems.
2. Develop a critically reflective evaluation of research and evidence-based approaches in this field.
3. Acknowledge the diverse groups affected by substance use problems and think about tailored approaches.
4. Recognize the importance of a continued open public discussion around prevention, treatment and policy, translating the knowledge from the scientific evidence.
5. Communicate research or proposals on addictions and substance use considering the personal, social, scientific and health policy context where that research or proposal occurs.
6. Examine personal bias and gain some insight on others' bias when facing substance related issues.
Course Structure:

This is not a lecture-based class, but a class that is built upon the experiences, backgrounds and interests of the students, which the instructional team moderates and frames. Current events in policy also impact the focus of the class. Thus, each year the class’ topics vary, as well as the depth in which they are explored. Class discussion is a core element in this course; the introduction of the conceptual framework will be mostly through moderation of the class (e.g., students’ discussion and presentations), short lectures when pertinent, and invited presenters. Students will present and participate in group activities and are encouraged to come prepared (e.g., self-selected readings, experiences, reflections, etc.), according to their background and interests. The course runs weekly with a 3 hour session, for 13 weeks.

Course Assessment Methods:

The aim of the assessments is to help the student to organize new information, integrate it with previous knowledge and provide a critical appraisal regarding public health approaches to substance use. Therefore, ongoing assessment is an integral part of learning throughout this course, through the following activities and assignments:

a) Class engagement: To recognize the importance of a continued open public discussion in this field, it is important to be able to engage in such discussions. Small group activities to work on specific topics, feedback on oral presentations and final commentary assignment, individual collaboration to the overall discussion. Because of the nature of the topics, it is very important to consider many variables implicated; group discussions are an important tool to achieve that goal.

b) Oral presentation: Students will select a study, a topic or situation that poses a Public Health challenge (current or former) related to substance use to present to the class. The student will present the main message of the selected subject matter and critically discuss it considering (where applicable): target population, aims, methodology, outcomes, impact and policy. It is encouraged that students incorporate their background (e.g., nursing, statistics, etc.) on the analysis of the selected topic.

c) Written assignment: Students will select a topic on substance use and write an evidence-based commentary considering: what is known about the topic, what is an unknown and future directions. The paper should be no more than 500-700 words (excluding references and title). The discussion must be evidence-based with proper citations and references. Creativity and originality combined with realistic and critical appraisal need to be core elements of the paper. Alternatively, students can write an op-ed.
**Course Grading Criteria:**

This is an interdisciplinary course, therefore diversity of interpretation and points of views are welcomed. Performance expectations are summarized in the table below. Letter grade allocations will follow those listed in the UBC Academic Calendar¹.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
<th>Good Quality</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Class engagement</td>
<td>Speaks up. Arguments supported by evidence. Keeps conversation flowing.</td>
<td>Speaks up, variably. Arguments mostly supported by evidence.</td>
<td>Speaks if asked. Arguments somehow supported by evidence. Intervention needed for conversation flow. Discussion is somehow related to the context. Rarely respectful and mindful of words chosen to express ideas. Rarely creative and positively convincing in making arguments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Keeps discussion to the context, elaborating. Always respectful and mindful of the words chosen to express ideas. Very creative and convincing with argument presented in a positive way.</td>
<td>Contributes occasionally to the conversation. Occasionally respectful and mindful of words chosen to express ideas. Occasionally creative and positively convincing in making arguments.</td>
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<td>Oral presentation</td>
<td>Topic is highly relevant to the course and personal background.</td>
<td>Topic is relevant to the course and personal background.</td>
<td>Topic is somehow relevant to the course; personal background not explicit.</td>
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<td>30%</td>
<td>Presentation content, pace and style are engaging. Content is accurate.</td>
<td>Presentation content, pace and style are fairly engaging. Content is mostly accurate. Take home message is clear. Discussion is somehow interactive with audience. The audience ends with a fairly clear understanding of the point of the presentation.</td>
<td>Audience has difficulties engaging. Content needs more work. Take home message is clear but only in the beginning. Responses could be more conversational. The audience ends with a slight understanding of the point of the presentation.</td>
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<td>Written assignment</td>
<td>Excellent a) summary of the topic to be commented on, with proper references; b) identification of the pros and cons and c) recommendation of future directions. Discussion is evidence-based. Very good combination of originality with critical appraisal. Excellent flow, reads very well, keeps reader engaged.</td>
<td>Very good a) summary of the topic to be commented on, with proper references; b) identification of the pros and cons and c) recommendation of future directions. Discussion is evidence-based. Very good combination of originality with critical appraisal. Good flow, reads well, keeps reader engaged.</td>
<td>Good a) summary of the topic to be commented on, with proper references; b) identification of the pros and cons and c) recommendation of future directions. Discussion is evidence-based. Good combination of originality with critical appraisal. Reads well but the flow could be improved to keep reader engaged.</td>
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¹ Visit the Graduate Studies website for further information on grading practices: https://www.grad.ubc.ca/faculty-staff/policies-procedures/grading-practices
Class Themes:

Each year students bring a breadth of topics, experiences and interests to the class. There are also overarching and recurrent themes that the instructional team will use to frame and consider these topics (when pertinent). These themes may be organized as follows:

**Introduction: Public Health approaches to substance use and addictions, an inter and multidisciplinary approach**

- Presentation of the course contents and class participants.
- Discussion of academic, personal and social backgrounds and beliefs around drug use and addiction as a starting point towards building evidence-based conclusions.
- Discussion of concepts ‘abuse, dependence, addiction, recreational use’.
- Defining drug use, drug abuse, substance dependence and addictive behaviours.
- Critically reflect on assumptions and potential bias and stigma on past and present terminology.

**Substance use and addictive behaviours in numbers: Overview of the nature and dimension of the phenomenon.**

- Presentation and discussion of global and local data on prevalence, incidence and patterns of substance use and addictive behaviours.
- Examine and reflect on the methodologies used to obtain data on substance use and addictive behaviours and the implications.

**Impact of adverse life events on substance use and addictive behaviours**

- Examine the prevalence of life stressors and victimization among substance using individuals and their impact on the onset, use and relapse of addictive behaviours.
- Guided questions to reflect on why these stressors could have such a significant impact and how public health can intersect with these profound issues.

**Harm reduction.**

- History and definition of Harm Reduction strategies.
- Harm reduction interventions.
- Evidence supporting Harm Reduction strategies.

**Policy and Law**

- Acquire a global understanding of policies around drug use and addictive behaviours to control, regulate, prohibit and penalize, and the impact of those policies. Implications in the Canadian context.
- Identify implications of these policies for public health approaches to addictions and substance use related harms.
Treatment.

- What is treatment? Evidence-based treatments for substance dependency and addictive behaviours.
- Treatment outcomes evaluations: when is a treatment ‘working’?

People with addiction problems in prison: a public health intervention opportunity.

- Overview of prison systems.
- Profile of people with addiction problems in prison.
- Prevention, treatment and harm reduction services for people in prisons and in reintegration services for persons on release from prisons.

Prevention

- Definitions and approaches to prevention in substance use.
- Protective and risk factors for the onset of drug use.
- Critically analyze the evidence of effectiveness of prevention programs.

Problems associated with substance use and addictive behaviours.

- Identify the general areas where adverse outcomes associated with addictive behaviours and substance use can be found for individuals and for societies.
- Examination of the complex relationship between adverse outcomes and addictive behaviours.

Vulnerability to substance use and addictive behaviors

- Aetiology of addictive behaviours: models that explain substance dependence.
- Substance use among young people: why vulnerability to substance use and addictive behaviors varies with age?
- Culturally-adequate public health approaches to substance use and addictions.

Closing class

- The final wrap-up will involve an evaluation of the course and reflection and discussion of the teaching and learning process surrounding the course.
Suggested readings (by theme):

Please note that readings are intended to be self-selected based on what is of interest to the students. The instructional team is always available to direct students to other specific resources.

Introduction


In numbers


European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). Drug report 2012.


Drug Policy


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**Associated Harms**


van Amsterdam J, Opperhuizen A, Koeter M, van den Brink W. Ranking the harm of alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs for the individual and the population. European addiction research 2010; 16(4): 202-7.


**Prevention**


**Drug Treatment**


**Harm reduction**


British Columbia Centre for Disease Control and the National Film Board of Canada (Producer), & Nettie Wild (Director). (2008). Bevel Up: Drugs, Users & Outreach Nursing. (Available from National Film Board of Canada, Vancouver, British Columbia).

**Prison**


**Vulnerability to Substance Use and Addiction**


**Life events**


**Suggested Texts:**
