

# Technology improves treatment options for drug users

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Australia's leading scientific journal in the substance use area, the *Drug and Alcohol Review* - published by Wiley-Blackwell, has released a special issue on the use of new technologies in the treatment of drug problems. The issue highlights the use of mobile phones, Internet and computers to treat drug use problems.

"We have a range of interesting articles that showcase new treatment options for drug users as well as the role technology has in research on drug and alcohol related problems", says Dr Kypros Kypri, editor of the special issue and co-author of an article on the THRIVE (Tertiary Health Research Intervention Via Email) program.

Jonathan Hallet from Curtin University in Perth and a team of scientists from Australia and New Zealand developed THRIVE as an alcohol intervention especially for university students. During the evaluation over 7000 students logged on and undertook screening and 34% screened positive for unhealthy drinking.

Also targeting young people and alcohol, Sylvia Kauer and colleagues from Murdoch Childrens' Research Institute in Melbourne undertook a school based study in which they gave Year 9 and 11 students and at risk adolescents a mobile phone to collect information about their alcohol use, mood and recreational activities. Sixty one percent of the school based sample and 88% of the high risk sample reported drinking alcohol. Drinking days involved less study and more sleeping than non-drinking days in the school based sample and was associated with lower mood in

the high-risk sample. In an Australian first, CounsellingOnline, a live online chat style counseling session, hosted more than 33,000 visits to the site, which also contains helpful information for people concerned about their own or someone else's drug use, and delivered over 2000 live counseling sessions in just over a year.

"Improved service accessibility via web-based AOD counselling is reflected in high levels of after-hours service utilisation and access by typically hard to reach populations," says Amy Swan, one of the authors of the paper from Turning Point in Melbourne, which hosts the service, and "the unique flexibility of web-based services offers the potential to complement and enhance the range of supports available to people affected by AOD issues in the community."

A new smoking cessation program called QuitCoach is also featured in the special issue. Dr James Balmford and his team from the Cancer Council in Victoria developed the Internet based screening and brief intervention program for smokers.

"Smokers that used the QuitCoach were more likely to be female and were younger than smokers in general and those that used the QuitLine telephone service," says Dr Balmford, which suggests that these types of interventions delivered online have the capacity to attract a different group into treatment.

"Drug treatment is keeping up with the rest of the world in terms of use of the Internet and computers for treatment," says Associate Professor Nicole Lee, co-editor of the special issue. "The number of people that use the Internet to access information means these interventions can reach large numbers of people who may not ordinarily come into treatment. "With a large number of young people using alcohol and drugs, broadening out treatment using media that they are familiar with has the potential to reduce alcohol and drug use and related harms", adds

Dr Kypri.

Young people's substance use is known to be strongly influenced by their perceptions of peer behavior. Dr LaBrie and colleagues' trialed wireless keypads to provide real-time drinking feedback to groups of student athletes in the USA. "The immediacy of this approach could reasonably be expected to make an impression on young heavy drinkers", says Dr LaBrie.

Other papers in the series highlight a computerized system to support a treatment approach known as 'contingency management' which rewards users for maintaining abstinence by Dr Massoud Vahabzadeh and colleagues at the National Institute on Drug Abuse in the USA and a paper by Professor David Kavanagh at Queensland University of Technology on the use of letters to deliver support to GP delivered intervention. Dr Rodríguez-Martos and colleagues from the Department of Health in Barcelona developed a Spanish language web-based brief intervention instrument—El Alcohol y Tú (Alcohol and You)—for hazardous drinkers. Dr John Cunningham and Trevor de Mielo looked at some of the issues in the application of internet based interventions and warn that it is risky to assume that interventions that work in face to face counselling can just be translated into the online environment. Dr Luke Wolfenden and colleagues trialed computerized smoking cessation intervention in a pre-surgical clinic in Australia and Dr Jim McCaimbridge and colleagues compared a range tools to measure young people's drinking for the online environment.

Dr Suzanne Nielsen from Turning Point looks at the use of technology in facilitating drug use including the ease at which pharmaceutical drugs can be bought online.

"As technology becomes more ubiquitous in everyday life, we need to think carefully about what this means for drug use and treatment," Says

Dr Nielsen.

This issue of *Drug and Alcohol Review* is online  
[www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/121638198/home](http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/121638198/home) .

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