

## ALAC's definition of Early Intervention

### **Definition**

Early intervention is:

“An approach that aims to reduce alcohol-related harm through timely identification and tailored advice and support for those at risk of harm due to their hazardous use of alcohol”.

A programme, service or resource **is** “early intervention” if it:

- is aimed at reducing alcohol-related harm and encouraging moderation
- is available for groups/individuals that are drinking in a hazardous manner
- is easily accessible
- has the capacity to identify those at high risk of due to their hazardous drinking
- is a form of secondary prevention
- is tailored for the groups/individuals that are drinking in a hazardous manner and are therefore at risk.

A programme, service or resource **is not** early intervention if it is:

- a service that is only provided to those in the early stage of their life although people at the early stage of their life may be in receipt of or subject of an early intervention service, programme or resource
- prevention or treatment for high dependency/chronic alcohol-related problems.

### **Early Intervention**

- detecting and screening of alcohol (or drug) use
- intervention provided before the onset of major problems.

### **Brief intervention**

- short sessions
- aimed at alcohol (or drug) consumption
- utilised with individuals
- at any point on the continuum of alcohol use, abuse and dependence.

### **The relationship between early intervention and brief intervention**

- Brief intervention **is an early intervention tool** where delivered by a generalist at a primary point of contact with the public.
- Brief intervention **is not an early intervention tool** where a series of sessions are delivered a specialist A&D worker to a dependent person. In this case, it is a treatment tool.

## DISCUSSION

### *Available definitions*

1. Early intervention is used as a term in many different areas of public health care. These include but are not limited to early childhood educational and social development, mental health, youth suicide and behavioural science. A search was made for existing definitions of early intervention and the definitions identified have been analysed. In summary, the main aspects of early intervention across the various disciplines, appear to be:
  - identifying and intervening before the onset of medical and social problems
  - screening patients to identify those at risk, including an element of proactive case finding
  - counselling identified problem drinkers about reducing their alcohol consumption
  - directed at those who do not have an established diagnosis of a condition
  - comes before the usual or expected time
  - aimed at changing the course of behaviour
  - involves various educative and health promotion programmes and techniques including community development and education aimed at enhancing the capacity of community members to identify and assist people at risk
  - implies an element of selectivity and perhaps specificity
  - belongs to the domain of secondary prevention (in public health terms).
2. These definitions also exclude from the definition of early intervention:
  - treatment or intervention aimed at clearly established disorders or problems
  - interventions that do not include evidence of an element of proactive case finding or other mechanisms for enhancing early identification
  - selectively targeted primary prevention and
  - a service that is only provided to those in the early stage of their life.
3. The Council's strategic plan clearly signals a move away from "general" approaches to reducing alcohol-related harm and alcohol-misuse, to focusing the activities of the Council toward three main population groups who are experiencing the greatest alcohol-related harm or who are at risk of doing so. These groups are Māori, Pacific and Young People (12-24).
4. In addition two major strategies to address these groups are also being applied – supply and provision of alcohol, including the environment of supply with a particular focus on supply to young people and early intervention to assist young people and adults address early stage hazardous drinking before dependency develops. Early intervention is envisaged as spanning the target groups and contributing to the successful reduction of alcohol-related harm among them.
5. In developing this working definition, the Council has used the following criteria.
  - that early intervention should be able to be delivered outside traditional settings i.e. that delivery is not restricted to medical/clinical settings
  - that there should be differentiation between early intervention and brief intervention

- that the audience we are aiming for are those who have an existing (albeit unrecognised) alcohol-related problem
- that early intervention is a form of prevention – trying to prevent ongoing hazardous drinking or “the slide” into dependent drinking thereby reducing potential harm.

### *Screening*

6. Screening is essential if those with hazardous drinking patterns are to be identified (whether by themselves or others) and action taken (whatever form that may take). This infers that, to be effective, screening should take place over as wide a group of people as possible. ALAC’s current focus is generic early intervention approaches.
7. As resources are limited it may be more appropriate for the Council to initially limit the development of screening tools/approaches to those target groups identified in the strategic plan. These tools/approaches could be expanded to include the general population once the target groups are well catered for. There are however difficulties in developing these types of resources for the target groups, particularly Māori and Pacific, because of the limited experience the mainstream health workforce have with doing this.
8. The Māori and Pacific A & D workforce, some with ALAC’s support, are currently focused on developing culturally appropriate policies and practices related to the core skills required for delivering alcohol and drug treatment services. Early intervention as a concept should be introduced as a core skill as soon as possible. The work that is currently being completed on cultural concepts will provide an excellent basis for the development of early intervention tools/programmes for delivery/use by Māori and Pacific people.

### *Brief intervention and early intervention – what is the difference?*

9. Early intervention refers to the detecting and screening of alcohol (or drug) use and providing an intervention before major problems develop (Jarvis et al 1995).
10. To be early intervention in the New Zealand context, the intervention should detect those with hazardous alcohol use early in the health service or social service relationship with the client. For most this will mean the detection of hazardous drinking before major problems develop. Any service should devise protocols to ensure those with major problems detected during the process of early intervention receive appropriate help.
11. The characteristics of any primary healthcare or social service provider’s early intervention process would include a process of systematic case finding appropriate to that provider. Once a case is detected, an effective early intervention programme intervenes to help the client. Interventions, of course, can include brief intervention.
12. Brief interventions are usually little more than a well-judged brief comment or discussion with a client to encourage them to think about their alcohol and drug using behaviour. For some clients it is little more than raising an awareness in their mind that their problems might be easier to resolve if they drank at safer levels. For others it is to encourage them to become more uncomfortable with the discrepancy between where their life is and where it could be if they drank

safely, and for others and if they are ready, the brief intervention may encourage them to make a change.

13. For a hazardous drinker this change may be to design a plan to assist them to drink safely. For a dependent drinker the change encouraged by a series of brief interventions may be to accept referral to a treatment agency. Obviously over a period of years a client may receive several brief interventions from several providers before deciding to make a change.
14. Brief interventions are short sessions aimed at alcohol (or drug) consumption that can be utilised with individuals at any point on the continuum of alcohol use, abuse and dependence. The two can overlap conceptually and functionally, as early interventions are often brief (Jarvis et al 1995).<sup>1</sup>
15. Thus, to be an early intervention, the intervention **must occur early on in a problem before the onset of major problems.**

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<sup>1</sup> *Brief Interventions: Good in theory but weak in practice?* Ann M Roche and Toby Freeman, Paper presented to the International Research Symposium, Preventing Substance Use, Risky Use and Harm: What is Evidence-Based Policy? 24-27 February 2003

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## **Independent Peer Review**

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