

# Missing links

## Reviews

### YOUTHORIA: ADOLESCENT SUBSTANCE MISUSE – PROBLEMS, PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

Phil Harris  
Russell House Publishing  
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New to the field in 1992, a major lesson for me was discovering the absence of drug and alcohol services for under-18s. Agencies recognised this age group's existence and needs, but felt constrained by legalities in treating them. They were also aware that introducing young people into adult services was in no way appropriate to their needs and situations.

The 1996 publication of *The substance of young needs* by the NHS Health Advisory Service was a welcome acknowledgement of the gap in services and played an important role in identifying needs and populations previously invisible to, or overlooked by decision makers, if not service providers. Along with the ACMD's 2003 *Hidden harm*, this report was instrumental in shaping and informing policy and provision for young people affected by substance misuse.

Yet neither report figures in *Youthoria's* 35 pages of references. This ambitious and information-packed volume aims to 'identify differences between young people's and adults' substance use' and, therefore, relevant responses and service provision. The book attempts 'to integrate these disciplines [prevalence patterns, adolescent development, substance misuse problems, prevention and treatment] into a cohesive vision of young people's substance misuse.' This suggests that although much has been clarified about young people's substance use and needs since the publication of the 1996 HAS report, practice and service provision still fall short of need.

*Youthoria's* introduction indicates its intended or potential audience, from youth workers through families to commissioners and academics. The variety of this audience is certainly catered for by the extensive and comprehensive content of the book. But this coverage might also act as a deterrent to some of its anticipated audience. There is so much content and discussion it can become overwhelming. And the treatment of much of the content – a thorough exposition of theory, evidence and research studies without

clear or firm conclusions – is likely to leave many readers trying to work out what the implications are for their discipline and practice. In addition, the book lacks an index – a major failing in a volume with so much valuable content.

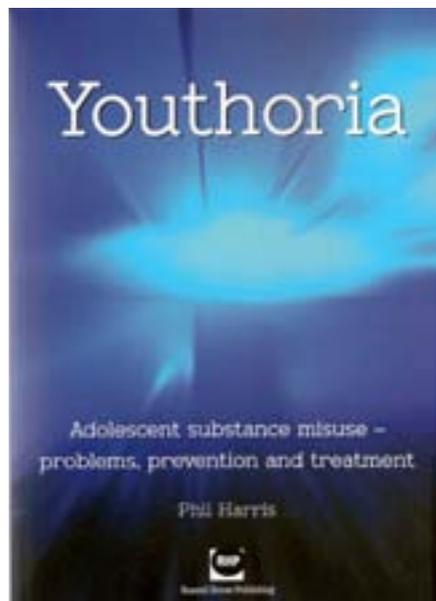
There is also a sense that events may well have overtaken some of the well-identified groups of practitioners. One such is 'substance misuse youth workers,' a job description which raises hopes that such staff have been trained and are in post, but who are likely to have been re-assigned or dismissed in the wake of public sector spending cuts in the past four years. The ACMD, amongst others, has pointed to the recent dis-investment in drug and alcohol services, an area where young people's services have always been seen as a bit of a luxury. The current political focus on new psychoactive substances and legal highs is not yet translating into specialist provision for this new(ish) phenomenon and demography.

In a different context, Harris points out that: '...all too often, treatment systems are developed that are based on political agendas rather than the clinical needs of those they try to help.' He consistently emphasises the importance of needs-responsive services for young people, and an understanding of those needs and the ways in which they might be best responded to so that when political and budgetary climates are favourable, evidence and knowledge is readily available to commissioners and practitioners. There is a welcome reminder of the centrality of alcohol to young people's needs.

Reviewers habitually look at books' references to see what is, and isn't, there. Given the emphasis on the significance of peer cultures for young people's behaviours, I noted the omission of Dick Hebdige's *Sub-culture: the meaning of style*.

Harris emphasises the need to consider all the factors that can influence substance-using behaviour in young people's lives. Willy de Haes' work supports this analysis, pointing to young people's wider social and emotional needs. De Haes says that whether or not they are met heavily influences what we now call the 'protective factors' which are liable to reduce young people's propensity to experience problematic substance use. He, too, is absent from the references.

■ **Blaine Stothard** is a prevention specialist and Druglink's book reviews editor



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