

A qualitative study of General Assistant staff in the Addiction Service: A front-line story

Conor Breen (1633413), Supervisor Name: Mr. Tom Prenderville

Abstract

This research was conducted with the aim of exploring the impact working as a General Assistant within the Addiction Service in the Dublin area has on an individual. Through the course of this qualitative study, six semi-structured interviews were conducted with three male and three female General Assistants. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data through the use of Nvivo 10 software. Six themes arose from the data and were explored further in the findings and discussion sections. The research was the first of its kind to deal with the impact on General Assistants within the Addiction Service but it could go some way to filling the gap in knowledge and developing the role further.

Introduction

The purpose of this research study was to ascertain whether working as a General Assistant in the H.S.E. Addiction Service in the Dublin area impacts on the lives of the men and women who perform this role with empathy and professionalism.

Apart from the Murphy (1998) study, there was no research available pertaining directly to the role of General Assistant, there was research from other front-line disciplines which relates very closely to some of the experiences General Assistants go through. Research relating to doctors, nurses, pharmacists, social workers, social care workers, harm reduction staff, key workers, and residential care teams was all analysed to understand the impact being in a care giving profession has on an individual. This research gave some understanding of the experiences individuals feel on the front-line of treatment services for such a marginalised, chaotic, and vulnerable cohort such as those suffering from opiate addiction.

The research analysed encompassed all aspects of the therapeutic treatment of service users and the role that front-line staff play in providing that service. It explores both the positive and negative aspects of the roles and interactions with service users throughout their treatment.



Method

The nature of this research study was qualitative by design and it sought to answer the research question; ‘What impact does working on the front-line of methadone maintenance treatment have on General Assistant staff in Addiction Centres in the Dublin area?’.

Six semi-structured interviews were conducted using a questionnaire compiled by the researcher in conjunction with their supervisor and these were recorded on an Olympus digital recorder. The interviews were then transcribed verbatim into a Word document and the data was then entered into the Nvivo 10 software. Nodes were then extracted and analysed thematically. Six themes were derived from the resulting data and these constituted the findings of this research study. All data was stored on a password protected laptop.

The ethical considerations relating to this research study were immense, due in no small part to the sensitivity of the research data and the confidentiality which surrounds the role of General Assistant within the H.S.E Addiction Service. Participants were assured of anonymity and were free to withdraw at any stage of the process. To the researcher it seemed that the interview process was a therapeutic experience for the participants but debriefing was conducted after the interviews to ensure participant safety and well-being.

Results

Six main themes emerged from the data and were explored. These themes were: the role of General Assistant; being part of the multidisciplinary team; negative aspects of the job; stress associated with the job and support services; emotional labour; and training and changes that could be made to the role. The unique relationship General Assistants have with their service users was evident through all of the above themes.

Discussion

The role of General Assistant is one which, in the opinions of the participants, is not utilised to the full for the benefit of the service user. The intimate and trusting relationship which is developed over the years of close interactions is unique within the Addiction Service. The ‘invisible’ aspects of emotional labour which staff engage in numerous times a day with service users, such as crisis intervention, largely go unnoticed but they do impact on those individual’s lives.

The negativity and stress which surrounds the role was an issue which came to the fore in a number of themes. The service users are a vulnerable, marginalized group but some can be violent, aggressive, abusive, and threatening to staff on a regular basis but yet General Assistants perform their duties in a non-judgmental, empathic, compassionate, and professional manner which is a testament to their unique relationship with the service users.

References

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