

PIONEERS IN HEALTHCARE

“ Addictions research is multi-faceted, crossing many different scientific domains and disciplines ”





WORLD RESEARCH AND INNOVATION CONGRESS

ADDICTION AND LIFESTYLES IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPE – REFRAMING ADDICTIONS PROJECT

Speaking candidly about ill-founded perceptions of addiction, Dr Peter Anderson, co-leader of the pioneering and transdisciplinary ALICE RAP initiative, is working to define new approaches to better support those most in need

What are the core objectives of the Addiction and Lifestyles in Contemporary Europe – Reframing Addictions Project (ALICE RAP)?

The core objective is to reframe how we understand addictions and lifestyles. From this we propose a redesign of governance, based around the question of how societies and governments better manage addictions, to reduce their toll on individual and societal health and wellbeing.

We want to provide the science that helps in a redesign of addiction governance, placing addictions in the frame of societal wellbeing. This accounts for interactions between addictive substances and behaviours; and aspects of living such as health, mental health, personal security, educational achievement, employment, social connectedness and transparent governance regimes.

Could you identify some of the key challenges posed by substance use and addictive behaviours in Europe at present? How is ALICE RAP looking to stimulate widespread debate on current and future approaches to addictions?

The main challenge is profit. Many companies and individuals make a great living by putting profit motives ahead of individual and societal wellbeing. In ALICE RAP, we aim to point out the harms and social costs arising from the use of addictive substances and behaviours, and describe the profits businesses make and how the power of these industries influence the political processes. By so doing, we hope to more easily identify some of the forces and determinants of (problematic) use of addictive substances and behaviours, so that appropriate responses can be more easily designed.

How have public discourse and social perceptions of drugs and their consumers transformed over the years, and what has changed

regarding the role of different actors and networks? How is ALICE RAP investigating these trends?

I think we are emerging from an era of deregulation and market-driven approaches regarding legal substances and behaviours, although there is still a long way to go. I see a shift towards recognising that governments have a role in creating environments in which healthy choices become the easier choices. The other great thing that is changing is the realisation that the so-called 'war on drugs' is failing and that this is not the right approach to dealing with illicit drugs.

We are investigating all of these trends by mapping historical approaches. To achieve this, we study media and public images of addictions and describe in detail all the current government approaches to dealing with addictions. We then frame these on a number of axes of, for example, approaches that are more focused on the individual or the collective, or approaches based on crime or health and wellbeing.

Why do you think most drug policies have failed to understand addiction complexities, and by what means does ALICE RAP inform public and political dialogue on addiction and lifestyles in Europe?

One of the problems is that too many people approach addictions with simple dichotomies that are false. One such instance is to describe someone as being either addicted or not addicted, whereas this is not the case. In ALICE RAP, we view addictions as being the sustained, heavy use of a substance or behaviour over time. This obviously occurs on a continuum and can happen to many of us over different periods of our lives. Throughout ALICE RAP, we are taking a lot of approaches to inform public and political dialogue, through scientific publications, our website, newsletters, policy briefs and as many meetings as possible with government officials.

What are the current limitations facing addiction research, and how has ALICE RAP managed to overcome them? What more can



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be done to better understand the mechanisms of addiction and lifestyle choices?

It is fair to say that the funding available for addiction research does not match the size and scale of the problems. As such, one of the issues facing addiction research is simply insufficient resources. This is particularly the case for policy-based research and translational research that studies the impact of science on policy.

Another big problem is that addictions research is multi-faceted, crossing many scientific domains and disciplines. These disciplines must talk with, and learn from, each other in order to build up a more comprehensive picture of the size of the problems, and what can be done to solve them.

What would you highlight as the project's greatest achievement to date?

The first achievement is actually a process one, but is nonetheless very important: we have distilled a transdisciplinary research approach. We have approximately 150 scientists working on this project from all over Europe (and indeed the world) from disciplines across the humanities and social sciences and the biological and medical sciences, ranging from anthropology to toxicology. These scientists are interacting with one another, undertaking combined research and recognising that transdisciplinary research also means science policy dialogue, and that policy makers need to be actively involved in the research process from the beginning. This is difficult to achieve, but government officials have attended all of our meetings.

The second achievement is a scientific understanding that addiction is best described and defined as sustained heavy use over time. This opens us up to a much broader view of addictions, and one that is much closer to ordinary people's understanding. It means that you

How do you investigate youth in the context of addiction and lifestyle factors?

The brain undergoes major restructuring during adolescence, and this restructuring is vulnerable to addictive substances. Young people represent a horizontal area of study throughout ALICE RAP. In particular, we are studying what determines use and problematic use among young people; which specific youth-orientated policies exist to protect young people; and how we can identify and promote resilience factors that enable young people to manage risks without problems occurring.

are not stuck with a dichotomous view of addictions (addicted or not addicted), starts to treat people as people, and enables a much broader range of approaches to be implemented to help people.

Our third achievement is to gain agreement to our understanding of addictions within a societal wellbeing frame. We use the wellbeing frame of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which describes societal and individual wellbeing as comprising many different components. Each element affects addictions and is affected by them in turn. This framing gives us a much broader view, and allows us to view illegal drugs in a much broader way, rather than just crime.

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