

## Commentary on Stuart *et al.* (2013): Domestic violence and interventions to reduce alcohol use

This study, reported by Gregory Stuart and colleagues, offers empirical evidence to support the hypothesis that perpetrators of domestic violence who receive a brief intervention to address alcohol use in addition to a 40-hour group batterer programme will not only consume fewer drinks (and on fewer days) than those who only receive the batterer programme, but will also be less likely to be aggressive and violent [1]. Although these effects fade over time, these findings are significant in the context of an area in which the efficacy of many behaviour change programmes has yet to be demonstrated adequately [2], and in which there is a pressing need to develop more effective interventions [3]. Given that the alcohol intervention utilized in this study was only 90 minutes long, there is considerable potential for brief interventions of this type to be integrated into other batterer programmes in ways that place minimal additional demands on both service providers and clients. Brief alcohol interventions have been shown to be consistently effective in other populations [4], and this study provides further evidence that focused intervention around alcohol use is likely to pay dividends in terms of preventing further violence.

Findings such as these should not, however, come as a particular surprise. Those who deliver programmes will know how common it is for perpetrators to view alcohol use as a trigger for violence [5], and the co-occurrence between alcohol consumption and/or substance misuse and episodes of domestic violence is now well documented [6,7]. It has also been established that alcohol consumption not only influences the severity of the violence [8], but also reduces programme attendance and efficacy [9]. Alcohol use is relevant to domestic violence not only when intoxication over-rides the broad disposition to self-regulate aggressive behaviour [10], but also in terms of how it influences the way in which perpetrators (mis-)perceive provocation [11]. What is more surprising, perhaps, is the apparent lack of attention that is given to alcohol use in many contemporary batterer programmes [10], although programmes exist that include modules to promote abstinence [12]. More intensive and specialized programmes are, however, rare. A recent review of programmes published by the Washington State Institute for Public Policy [13] identified only one rigorous evaluation of a substance abuse treatment that had been designed specifically for batterers. As such, questions remain about how alcohol treatment might be best integrated into existing programme content and the optimal intensity or type of treatment that is required.

It is interesting to note that the alcohol intervention used in this study drew heavily upon the principles of motivational interviewing [14]; an approach that is genuinely collaborative in nature. Uncertainty also exists within the domestic violence sector about how the extent to which interventions should be delivered collaboratively, with some programmes predicated on the need to actively confront the attitudes and values that support violence from the outset of intervention in order to overcome claims that the behaviour was not serious, or that in some way the victim provoked or deserved the violence [15]. It is sometimes assumed that the perpetrator must be confronted or 'jolted' into active behaviour change, and more didactic, psycho-educational approaches to group work are recommended. Other programmes can be considered to be more psychotherapeutic in nature and consistent with the approach to intervention that was adopted in this study. Such differences can be understood in terms of broader questions about how to best match clients who are at different stages of change to different styles of intervention [16,17], although the work of Stuart and colleagues seems to suggest that more collaborative and client-centred methods of intervention will be broadly applicable to changing the behaviour of perpetrators of domestic violence.

### Declaration of interests

None.

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