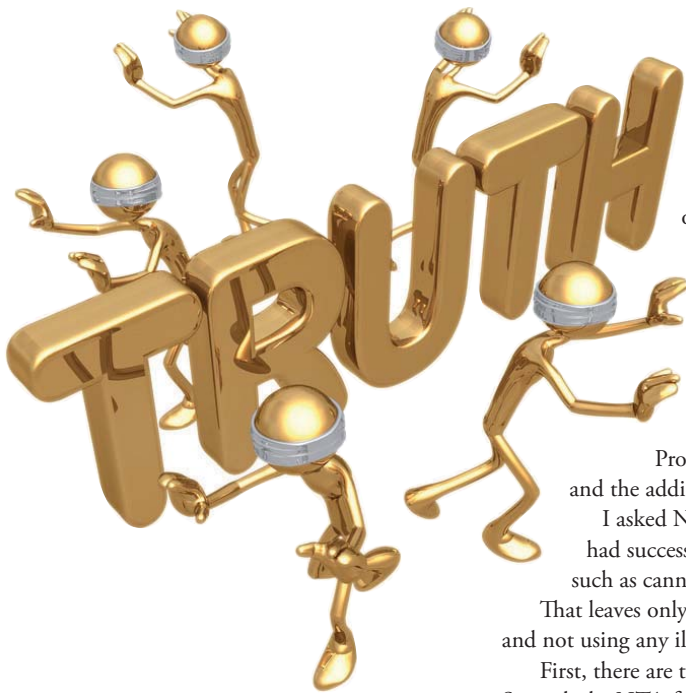


THE DODGY DOSSIER OF NON-TREATMENT: 1

Labour's National Treatment Agency claims that its expensive Byzantine creation helped 24,656 people to "complete treatment free from dependency" – the true figure is at most a third of that. Deirdre Boyd goes number-crunching.



On page 15 of this issue of *Addiction Today*, the NTA reiterates claims in its 2008-2009 *Annual Report*, most spectacularly that “This year 24,656 adults –12% of the total in treatment – successfully completed treatment free of dependency”.

A closer inspection reveals that this is untrue.

Point 5.2 in the *Annual Report* states that “24,656 (41%) were discharged successfully, defined as those completing treatment free of their drug of dependency”. This last phrase is the crucial one: it means that 24,656 patients stopped using one drug – but were using others. This is equivalent to saying that an alcoholic has completed treatment free of dependency on whiskey but is now dependent on vodka, brandy, high-strength lagers... you get the picture.

Professionals refer to this as cross-addiction, where one drug is replaced with another and the addictive behaviours continue unchanged.

I asked NTA head office to confirm this. “The 15,676 who completed ‘free of dependency’ had successfully overcome addiction but may have occasionally been using other substances such as cannabis,” came the written reply, revealing ignorance of the health issues.

That leaves only 8,980 patients who completed treatment “free of dependency (no drug use) and not using any illicit drugs at the time of exit”. Even here, a reality check is needed.

First, there are those who might wish to enhance figures because they are dependent on funding. Second, the NTA-funded TOP form used to measure results is merely anecdotal self-report, without hard confirmation from, for example, hair or urine drug tests. Third, the TOP form gives no option to mention addictive prescribed drugs such as benzodiazepine or methadone – the NTA carefully avoids reference to such drugs. As the specifically designed tool of measurement, TOP thus renders it impossible for the public to learn how many of the 8,908 “drug-free” patients be hooked on licit drugs.

Although the NTA and drug/alcohol leads at the Department of Health deny that drug-free results come from rehabs and daycare with similar approaches, this year again the number reasonably estimated to be drug-free matches the small number of patients (2%) who managed to get into rehab.

One of the increasingly disillusioned Drug/Alcohol Action Team commissioners wrote to *Addiction Today* that “The terms ‘treatment complete’ or ‘treatment complete, drug free’ are not clinical terms/definitions – the terms essentially record entry into and exit from the NDTMS reporting framework and have no clinical value. The NTA’s key error is to attach clinical significance to these numbers when they actually just show entry and exit from the reporting framework”.

The *Annual Report* also refers to “60,386 individuals discharged” – euphemisms abound here as a deeper look reveals that 905 were “discharged” from this earth completely, having died. More had “moved away”, had “treatment withdrawn” or are “not known”. 1,769 are said to have declined treatment, such as it is – this might be due to the growing phenomenon of people refusing a lifetime on methadone, or could reflect the stories of a high-volume low-care organisation which cannot cope and gets vulnerable clients to sign DIR forms which they think give treatment but are refusal forms.

The *Annual Report* does not reveal that drug deaths are higher than when the NTA was formed. Nor does it highlight that about 19 rehabs/treatment centres have been forced to close.

Another target not met is the percentage of all addicts who should have been offered a way into treatment services. The NTA has redefined “problem drug users” as only those who use heroin and crack cocaine. Even powder cocaine is omitted, as well as other harmful drugs. So the target is slashed.

The NTA claims that “the results... are in line with the study published in *The Lancet*... they are proving particularly effective”. We challenge that dodgy *Lancet* dossier on page 19 overleaf.