**////Title: Regulating the Quality of Treatment for Substance-related Disorders**

**////Stand-first**:

In Australia, like in many countries, substance related disorders remain a pressing societal concern. The Australian government recently introduced a new framework to help regulate the quality of care provided and this has been reviewed by Simone Henriksen from the University of the Sunshine Coast. Her analysis highlights a variety of challenges that need to be faced and she provides critical recommendations to support the implementation and sustained usage of the new framework.

**////Body text:**

In 2019, Australia introduced the National Quality Framework to help regulate its alcohol and other drug treatment services. This was one of several strategies implemented by the Australian government to help reduce substance use and prevent it from having a detrimental effect on the wider society.

Evidence has suggested that providing alcohol and drug treatment services can improve individuals’ physical and psychological health and can also have a positive impact on other community members by reducing crime and encouraging greater social inclusion. These treatment services are also proven to be an economically viable solution.

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The National Quality Framework was developed to provide a nationally consistent approach to drug and alcohol treatment services in Australia, and to ensure that those using these services are receiving the best quality of care. Prior to its introduction, there were considerable inconsistencies in how alcohol and treatment services were regulated across Australia. Traditionally, each territory had its own regulation system leading to the use of variable approaches. There have also been discrepancies in terms of funding and provision of services between different regions, and in regional and rural areas in particular, difficulties arise from a lack of residential care options.

In general, there has been concern regarding long waiting times, high costs, and barriers to accessing the most appropriate care. The Australian Government Department of Health aims to use the National Quality Framework to solve these issues and it is the first mandatory regulatory framework of its kind relating to alcohol and drug treatment services within the country. Undoubtedly, the success of the framework will rely on the robustness of its design. As such, the current challenges must be taken into consideration allowing for a regulatory tool that tackles the issues of quality whilst maintaining impartiality and encouraging accessibility wherever possible.

Treatment suppliers are expected to meet the standards set by the new framework before the end of 2022. Before its introduction, accreditation was not mandatory for all providers – now all providers will be required to hold accreditation and be revalidated every 3 to 4 years to ensure that standards are maintained. The framework comprises several different components including guiding principles, accreditation, and standards, as well as monitoring and compliance.

Its nine guiding principles are organisational and clinical governance, planning and engagement, collaboration and partnerships, workforce development and clinical practice, information systems, compliance, continuous improvement and health and safety. Due to the inclusion of accreditation, a list of alcohol and drug treatment services that meet the accredited standards will be published in the National Directory, a website where the public can search for services in Australia.

There is a more variable approach to monitoring and compliance, and processes will differ depending on funding status. Contractual arrangements will be used to monitor and enforce compliance with the National Quality Framework for government-funded treatment providers, whereas for other providers it will be at the discretion of each jurisdiction.

Overall, the principles behind the framework aim to shift some of the responsibility away from the government, encouraging individual providers to take more accountability for the quality of their services.

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Simone Henriksen from the University of the Sunshine Coast has reviewed the expectations of the National Quality Framework and assessed whether it is a suitable regulatory tool. She was keen to identify potential challenges that may be faced during implementation and through sustained usage.

One of her initial observations is that the National Quality Framework hasn’t provided a clear definition of what ‘quality’ means, and this could have negative repercussions in terms of assessing compliance. Simone Henriksen also highlighted that a lack of resources could be an issue, particularly given that the sector is currently underfunded. She suggests that it is important that adequate financial backing and infrastructure are in place for this framework to survive long term. A further concern is that some of the arrangements for monitoring and compliance don’t align with the national approach, which could lead to issues around uniformity.

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One of the main challenges facing the framework is the question of whether advancements in quality will really be achieved. Simone Henriksen suggests that this may prove difficult as the process of accreditation only deems providers as accredited or not, and does not give any extra merit for excellence. Thus, providers who are accredited are not provided with the motivation to push for further improvements. Whilst publishing accreditation in the National Directory is helpful for members of the public, it does not provide any further information or allow the public to make complaints. Simone Henriksen advises that a central body, capable of coordinating the National Quality Framework and managing complaints at a national level should be established.

Another concern is whether the goals of the National Quality Framework are clearly defined. The nine guiding principles do give providers a steer on what they should be achieving and set the criteria for measurement but may be too flexible. Although flexibility can be positive as it helps to accommodate the broad range of practitioners and services that are needed, Simone Henriksen feels the guidelines should be more industry-specific.

A key area that needs more clarity is the definition of quality. Research has shown that frameworks which are not clearly defined are harder to implement and sustain. This lack of definition can also have a negative impact on innovation, particularly relating to the development of treatments to tackle newer substances, as providers do not want to risk not meeting the standards. Simone Henriksen feels that part of the uncertainty comes from allowing providers to choose from several different sets of accreditation standards within the framework and recommends that the number should be reduced, something that has been seen to be effective in the implementation of other quality frameworks. She also recommends that there is more uniformity in terms of monitoring and compliance, removing the different practices that are determined by funding status.

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A final area of concern is whether the sector is ready to implement a new framework on this scale. The time and financial resources required by providers to meet the new standards could lead to a reduction in the variety and number of services they can provide. Whilst Simone Henriksen has highlighted key challenges and areas for improvement, she acknowledges that the National Quality Framework is an improvement on the current situation and with the right modifications, can hopefully lead to advances in care.

This SciPod is a summary of the paper ‘The National Quality Framework: The Benchmark for the Alcohol and other Drug Sector in Australia’, published in Medical Law Review. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/medlaw/fwab050

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