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Oral health within the justice system, involving the public in research design

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Background:

Evidence has shown that the rate of dental decay is four times higher for those in prison in comparison to the general population.

Objectives:

To gain Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) in the design of research that is focused on improving the oral health of people in custody.

Methods:

Ten ex-offenders were recruited (two female, eight male) and two prison officers. Virtual focus groups were conducted with a semi-structured guide designed alongside an experienced PPI lead. A facilitator ensured each attendee was given the opportunity to give their views on a range of topics including recruitment methods, retention and incentives to partake in research. The people involved provided perspectives on the research plan, formal ethical approval was therefore not required but the process was conducted in the spirit of ethical research.

Results:

Those involved in the focus group had a shared view as to the importance of oral health on social functioning, wellbeing, behaviour and the ability to re-enter society successfully on release. A common theme was a lack of health literacy, limited access to healthy choices, an eagerness to engage with peer-support programmes and themes of philanthropy towards those currently incarcerated. They were willing to be followed up post-release if there was an incentive given, such as help in accessing dental care or employment opportunities.

Conclusion:

This PPI project indicates that oral health is an important research area for this population and there is a willingness to play an active role in the design of oral health research.

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