

Dr Penny Abbott has recently returned from a two month Churchill Fellowship study tour. The goal of the study was to examine access to primary health care for people in contact with the justice system and people with substance use disorders.

As Penny noted, 'People in contact with the justice system commonly have complex health needs and come from a background of social disadvantage and fewer life opportunities. As a general practitioner (GP) in both the community and prison sectors, I have seen that one way to stop re-incarceration is to engage people in primary healthcare after they leave prison. Even better, incarceration can be prevented by addressing health and social support needs early. In particular, treating substance use disorders properly can stop a health issue turning into a prison sentence.'



Penny Abbott with Mayor James Diossa and Dr Michael Fine at City Hall, Central Falls, Rhode

She visited primary healthcare organisations, prison health services, re-entry programs and universities in the US and Canada. Penny has identified that there are multiple avenues to improve access to primary care for people involved with the justice system and people with addictions and has the following recommendations:

1. Create a more capable workforce through medical education
 - Ensure medical education includes
 - a. core teaching on the social determinants of health and the health and social inequities faced by people involved in the justice system
 - b. clinical placements where high quality management of substance use disorders is practiced
 - c. enhancement opportunities for students and junior doctors with interest in health inequality and correctional health
 - Create opportunities for 'eye opening moments' in medical education, including through clinical and service learning placements in underserved communities and correctional health settings.
2. Increase the capacity of primary care to work with underserved populations
 - Support Australian general practice to provide enhanced team care, utilising larger teams with roles in coordination of care and patient support.
 - Enhance general practice screening for problematic drug use

- Embed consideration of the social determinants of health into Australian general practice – ‘screen and intervene’
 - Ensure that adequate and appropriate community services are in place to assist people with social support needs
3. Improve the management of substance use disorders in general practice
- Build the capacity of Australian general practice to treat opioid use disorder and other substance use disorders through (a) promoting recognition that these are chronic diseases within the scope of general practice; and (b) resourcing suitable teams
 - Implement systems to prepare and mentor general practices as they commence treatment of opioid use disorder
 - Support general practice through timely and integrated support from specialist addiction services and pain management services
 - Uphold the rights of people with substance use disorders to equivalent healthcare
4. Improve linkage for people leaving prison into general practice.
- Promote general practice as the right place for people leaving prison to receive the care they need
 - Enhance prison health service capacity to ensure continuity of care and general practice linkage when people leave prison
 - Increase the capacity of general practice to assist recently released people

Finally, Penny recommends that everyone who has a passion for driving positive change in health or education should consider applying for a Churchill Fellowship!