

A Competent Workforce to Tackle Substance Misuse

Every worker in the substance misuse field now needs to have a working knowledge of DANOS. In the first of our series, Trevor Boutall, Skills for Health technical consultant, describes the standards and their purpose.



DANOS – the Drugs and Alcohol National Occupational Standards – were born out of a cross-sector imperative to develop a competent workforce to help substance misusers address their problems and meet the challenging demands of the government’s drugs strategy.

DANOS, which can be downloaded from www.DANOS.info, describe the standards of performance, knowledge and skills needed by individual practitioners if they are to be effective in playing their part in delivering this strategy.

Role Profile of a Drugs Worker from www.DANOS.info

With DANOS, every worker in the drugs and alcohol field, whether employed or volunteering, should be clear exactly what is expected of them and what they can contribute to delivering services that meet the needs of individuals and the communities they live in.

There are over 100 units within DANOS, covering the functions carried out by commissioners, service managers, and those delivering front line services in widely diverse contexts. Only a small proportion of units – perhaps 10, or 20 at most – will apply to any individual’s job. We call this group of units their role profile.

Practitioners having – and understanding – their role profiles is just the first step to ensuring we have a competent workforce; it helps them know how they should be performing. Within each unit there are performance criteria that allow practitioners to assess their own performance and get factual, evidence-based feedback from their line managers and others on how well they are doing.

If they are meeting the standard, that’s great! They can gain confidence that they are working in line with the national benchmarks of good practice, and, if they can prove they are, they can get accreditation through National

(and Scottish) Vocational Qualifications and other competence-based qualifications.

If, however, they are not meeting the standards, then they are not delivering services that meet either users’ or commissioners’ requirements. Practitioners need to identify where they are not consistently meeting the standards in their role profiles and reflect on the reasons for this. Do they need to change their practice to meet the standards? Are there organisational or systemic barriers to their meeting the standards? Are there areas or knowledge or specific skills they need to develop?

Each unit of the DANOS standards includes a detailed specification of the knowledge and skills required. Some of these are generic skills like communication, analytical or negotiating skills. Others are specialist knowledge and skills, such as knowing the different substances and their effects, or being able to work with children and young people. There are also context-specific areas of knowledge like familiarity with local agencies, protocols and practices. The knowledge and skills are defined as learning outcomes to help trainers prepare training courses and resources which develop these knowledge and skills and check that training has been effective.

Without the required knowledge and skills, practitioners cannot perform competently – they cannot meet the standards. They need to develop the necessary knowledge and skills, either through induction or through focused development activities, such as reading the relevant literature or participating in training events. They then need to apply their newly-acquired knowledge and skills in the work context under supervision and receive feedback on their performance until working to the standards becomes second nature.

The DANOS standards, together with the National Occupational Standards for other sectors – health and social care, criminal

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justice, mental health, youth work, housing, employment, sport, volunteering and others – have been designed to support a system of targeted continuing personal and professional development (CPPD).

The Cycle of Continuing Personal and Professional Development

CPPD is a shared responsibility of the individual practitioner and the organisation. Together, they must agree the requirements for their current – and future – roles, identify where performance meets requirements and, where it doesn’t, plan and undertake development activities. The cycle continues with a review of whether performance has improved in line with planned objectives and a regular review of the job role: how have the requirements changed, how will they change in the future, and how can the practitioner prepare to meet future challenges?

The DANOS standards themselves are subject to continuous review and improvement. They have recently been updated to reflect the latest evidence of what works, improvements in practice, and new models of partnership working between the health and social care sectors. They also incorporate a number of new standards covering the prescribing of controlled drugs, helping individuals comply with their medication, carrying out brief interventions with alcohol users, working with carers and families and recruiting and managing volunteers.

The world doesn’t stand still. The drugs our clients use, their needs for care and our responses to these needs are continuously changing. DANOS will continue to change to reflect these needs.

Next Month: Giving credit for competence – DANOS-based qualifications.