Returning to the homeland
A means of addressing heroin issues for young Vietnamese-Australian people & families

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Aim of Study

• To provide a description and understanding of the experiences of young Vietnamese-Australian heroin users, who have travelled to Vietnam as a means of addressing their heroin related issues
Methodology

• Critical ethnographic approach

• Research participants
  – 10 workers who worked with young Vietnamese-Australian heroin users
  – 8 young people who returned to Australia after travelling to Vietnam, aged between 17 and 23 years;
  – 8 young people who were in Vietnam aged between 16 and 25 years
  – 5 family members who sent and/or accompanied children to Vietnam.
What are the migration and settlement experiences of young Vietnamese-Australian heroin users and their families?
What are the experiences that have led young Vietnamese-Australians to become involved with the use and sale of heroin?

- I was always looking to something else, something else in life that could fulfil me, make me feel better you know. One day I was actually in a youth group, a Christian youth group. That was when I didn’t believe, I was only doing it for a social reason. And this girl asked me if I wanted to burn, I had no idea what it was. Next thing I knew I was just following the steps and she said, “Smoke this and then keep it in and then have a puff of this cigarette and really suck it in”. When I did that the feeling was just, I just felt like it was the best thing in life. It’s just the feeling to get out of everywhere, you know, all the problems on my shoulders they were all gone and I could get out of this place. And that place was just like a relief for me. And then I wake up the next day you know, all my pain would come back so I want to go back to that same place again

(Thanh, 17 years old Vietnamese-Australian young man).
How do these young people and their families explain their motivations for travelling to Vietnam for drug related reasons?

- Over here we’ve tried to detox them many times but they weren’t successful because they can ring at any time for someone to bring it [heroin] to them... That’s the problem that we had… so the family decided to send them to Vietnam. Vietnam is actually a gateway for the transport of narcotics. There’s a lot of it and I’m afraid there’s more of it than here. However, when we send them to Vietnam there are many family members who can come together to assist them. That’s the first reason. The second reason is that we can remove them from the lifestyle that they were leading… When they return to Vietnam it’s like an unfamiliar world to them.

(Hanh, 40 years old Vietnamese-Australian mother)
What are the young people’s experiences in Vietnam?

• I didn’t use because I had things to do. Each day there’s always someone around you. If you don’t do nothin’, you chat, muck around, play cards and after that at night probably go out eat and have a coffee. Especially having a coffee, that kills like half a day… I love coming back here; it’s really fun. I enjoy my time here. It’s different, it’s all new to me and the people here they live a different life, which is, I find a more enjoyable life than Australia because Australia is like everyone lives individually you know? Here the whole street knows each other basically.

(Ken, 17 years old Vietnamese-Australian young man).
collectivist tradition

The community here is more loving, like everyone talk to each other not like over there, like I don’t even know my next door neighbour… Like people [here in Vietnam] they talk more, it’s more community. Everything is close by. If you’re hungry, people bring food to your door. Over there, if you want to go somewhere you have to like hop into a car… [In Vietnam] Sometimes I can’t keep up with it. I have to follow the rules, like don’t lose the family name whatever, like I have to save face and that for the family… It’s a good thing but. Gives something to believe in.

(Tuan, 19 years old Vietnamese-Australian young man).
Everyone was good and encouraging towards me. My friends supported me with their encouraging words and my family cared for me. Over there [in Vietnam], there are drugs but because of friends, parents and families and also my future, I felt confident.

(Hung, 19 years old Vietnamese Australian young man)
What are the outcomes once these young people return to Australia?

- I saw a good future, but then I start using again. So that wasn’t really good. There were times I wanted to go back to studying, there were times where I wanted to go look for work, get a job, but then I started using again. There are things I want to do. I wanna just get a job, live a normal life like everyone else, be drug free. Eventually if I keep on using drugs you know, being around drugs, I’ll be left with nothing. You know what I mean? There’ll be no future.

(Phong, 21 years old Vietnamese-Australian young man).
Recommendations

• Cultural & socio-economic factors need to be incorporated into current understanding of heroin addiction

• WHO Primary Health Care approach
  – Reducing exclusion and social disparities in health
  – Organising services around people's needs and expectations
  – Integrating health into all sectors
  – Pursuing collaborative models of policy dialogue
  – Increasing stakeholder participation