

# Implementing the Alcohol, Smoking, Substance Involvement Screening Test and linked brief intervention service in primary care in Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

**Background.** This paper reports findings on the implementation, acceptability and uptake of the screening and brief intervention programme based on the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST) to help decrease substance misuse in primary care in Thailand.

**Methods.** Action research involving selection of suitable study areas; obtaining support for its introduction and corporation at national and local levels; training and monitoring of healthcare providers; delivery of the ASSIST-BI (brief intervention) procedure and assessments of acceptability and uptake of the procedure by patients and staff.

**Results.** Between October 2011 and October 2012, 5931 patients (2.5% of all patients attending primary care units) were screened with the ASSIST. Of these, 29.6 and 3.4% were in the moderate- and high-risk groups, respectively, and were offered BI or other treatment. The most popular substances used were tobacco and alcohol. Less than 1% screened positively for illicit substances.

**Conclusion.** The ASSIST detected many substance users capable of benefiting from intervention. The programme was well received by patients and staff. The development of the project from conception to inclusion in Thailand's national public health strategy is described and suggested as a model for introducing similar procedures into developing countries.

**Keywords:** brief intervention, developing countries, screening, substance misuse, Thailand

## Introduction

To help reduce the worldwide escalating problem of substance misuse, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends the Alcohol, Smoking and Substance Involvement Screening Test (ASSIST) followed by brief intervention (BI).<sup>1–3</sup> The *screening* component allows for scoring of pattern of problems related to all legal and illegal substance use, and has cut-off points that suggest harmful use and dependence. The principal aims of the procedure are to identify substance misuse at an early stage and offer help to people with this problem. This comes in the form of the *intervention* component—a brief, easy-to-administer procedure based on motivational therapeutic principles, for which there is increasing evidence of effectiveness.<sup>4–7</sup>

Screening and brief intervention (SBI) has been used in various healthcare settings, e.g. primary care, emergency departments, maternity and adolescent units, and occupational health care.<sup>8–12</sup> The WHO study of the effectiveness of ASSIST-linked BI in Australia, Brazil, India and the USA

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