

Bunny used to help teenagers withdrawing from drugs and alcohol

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ER, what's up doc? In a novel approach to tackling addiction, experts are relying on a resident rabbit to help teenagers withdrawing from alcohol and drugs.

Pet therapy is used in a variety of healthcare settings to help ease stress, improve wellbeing and divert focus away from their ailments, but a bunny is one of the more unconventional approaches in Footscray Hospital's adolescent withdrawal unit.

Western Health drug health services director Ruben Ruolle said he was approached by two staff members with the idea.



 Ruby Buttons inside a youth withdrawal room with nurse unit manager Ian Denney. Picture: Tony Gough

“They wanted to get a dog, but I wanted to start off with a smaller, more manageable creature,” Mr Ruolle said.

Occupational health and safety experts assessed whether there were any health or safety issues with the acquisition of a rabbit.

Ice, GHB, cannabis and alcohol are the most common addictions seen in patients as young as 12.

“A lot of the young people that come into the unit with drug and alcohol issues often have difficult pasts — trauma histories and family issues,” he said.

Mr Denney said the rabbit, named Ruby Buttons because of a little spot on her nose, was a tactile therapeutic tool for distracting young people.

“We are trying to give people new experiences that we hope will motivate them to go on a different path,” he said.

“Having a little non-threatening bunny is something for them to really engage with.

It’s part of a comprehensive psychosocial program the teens undertake during their medically supervised detox, which includes music and art therapy, gym sessions, as well as education on prevention, cravings and life skills.

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Fears the young people would be aggressive towards the rabbit were found to be unfounded with animals bringing out the softer side in them.

The feedback from their patients has been overwhelmingly positive, Mr Ruolle said.

“Young people tell us was one of the favourite things about their stay; they were able to care for another creature and not think about drugs or alcohol.”

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