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Insights from the Conference of International Association for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders – What Works in Sexual Crime Prevention



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Introduction

In August 2025, I attended the 2025 Conference of International Association for the Treatment of Sexual Offenders (IATSO) held in Poznan, Poland. IATSO is a leading global professional organisation dedicated to advancing research, clinical practice, policy and prevention in the domain of sexual offending. The Conference, gathering international researchers and clinicians, consisted of keynote, parallel and poster presentations covering a wide range of topics, including online sexual offending, incest, paedophilia, sex-offence specific assessment tools, neuropsychology, etc. This article summarises key highlights, learning points and personal reflections from the Conference.



Key Learnings

1. Global Issue of Online Sexual Offending

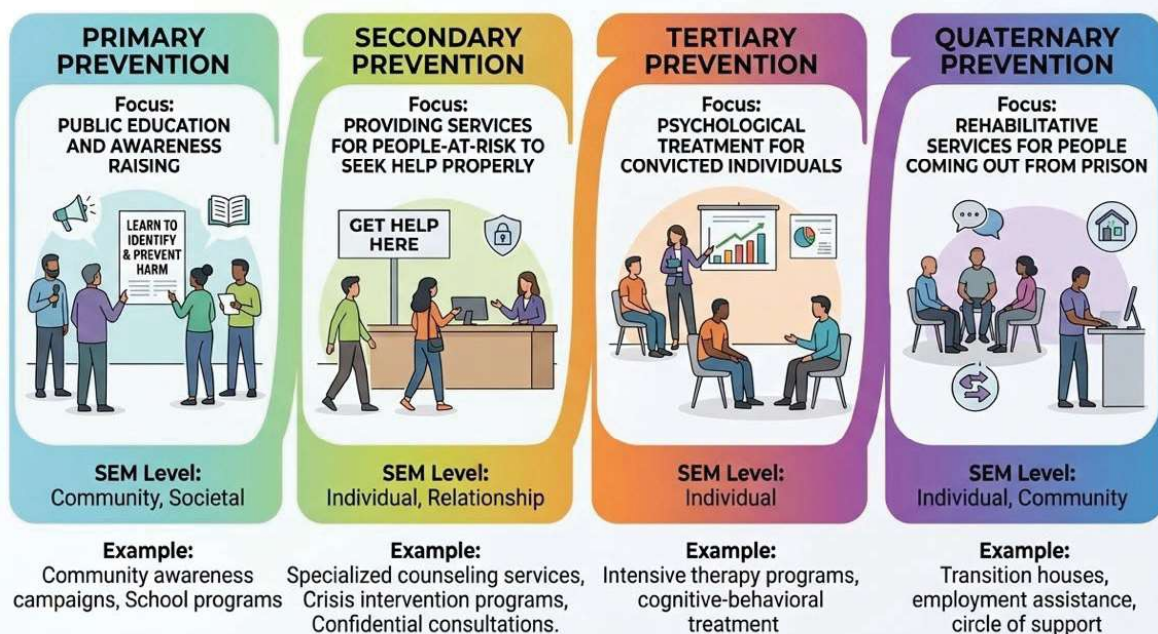
With the rise of emerging and ever-changing technologies including artificial intelligence (AI) and diverse digital platforms, online sexual offending becomes an alarming global issue. Technology not only facilitates the large-scale production and dissemination of and access to illegal sexual materials, but also creates new avenues for grooming, exploitation and cross-border sexual offending that are increasingly difficult to monitor and control.



For example, AI-driven tools may enable the creation of realistic synthetic images or videos (e.g. Deepfake), while anonymous digital platforms can mask offenders' identities and complicate law enforcement responses.

Researchers and practitioners from different countries are responding by conducting large-scale research and exploring innovative prevention strategies. In the Conference, there was a workshop held by The Protect and Prevent Through Support (2PS), which is a project funded by the European Union addressing child sexual abuse, particularly on the online environment. They highlighted the importance of intervening in different stages – not only after offending, but the upstream. Numerous programmes, such as *Stop It Now* in the United Kingdom (UK) and *Step To Support* in Germany, have been conducted as forms of secondary prevention to help people with paedophilia in the community, who are regarded as individuals at risk of sexual offending. The success of these pilot schemes demonstrates that providing confidential, accessible and non-judgmental avenues for individuals to seek help can reduce the risk of offending arising in the first place. In fostering safer communities, early engagement, public education and multi-agency collaboration are of paramount importance.

A STAGE-BASED INTERVENTION MODEL FOR SEX CRIME PREVENTION



Intervention can take place in different stages for sex crime prevention

2. Updated Research on Assessment Tools

Another key takeaway from the Conference was the opportunity to gain updated research and findings on widely used risk assessment tools, including the STAT-IC-99R, STABLE-2007 and CPORT. Some of the tools are commonly applied in our daily clinical work in assessing re-offending risk and planning treatment for persons in custody (PICs) with sexual offending behaviours.

The Conference presentations provided valuable insights into how these tools are being refined and validated through ongoing international research. Updates on predictive accuracy, applicability across different populations and integration with dynamic clinical judgment were particularly useful. Such developments not only enhance our ability to conduct more reliable and culturally sensitive assessments, but also ensure that our practice in Hong Kong remains aligned with international standards. Keeping abreast of these advancements allows us to apply the best practices in offender assessment and treatment, while also contributing to evidence-based decision-making in rehabilitation and risk management.



3. Evidence-informed Practice

In one insightful keynote presentation “Treatment for men who have sexually offended: Tips for success”, Professor Theresa Gannon from the UK provided a comprehensive overview of effective group treatment approaches for male PICs with sexual offending behaviours. Drawing on meta-analytic evidence, Prof. Gannon highlighted that conducting group treatment can effectively reduce re-offending risk. She synthesised key factors that contribute to successful group interventions, such as applying the Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR) model, incorporating the Good Lives

Model, and using cognitive-behavioural therapy as the treatment orientation.

She also pointed out that treatment effectiveness improves when the psychologists providing services give clinical supervision regularly. Gannon's findings were particularly inspiring for me, as they resonate with our ongoing efforts in the Evaluation and Treatment Unit: Psychological Programmes for Persons with Sex Offending Behaviours in Siu Lam Psychiatric Centre, which implements evidence-based treatment approaches for PICs with sexual offending behaviours. The alignment of her recommendations with our local practice reflects the potential for continuously successful outcomes and reinforces the value of continued investment in rehabilitation programmes in the Department.

4. Networking and Professional Exchanges

Beyond the formal presentations, one of the most valuable aspects of the Conference was the opportunity for networking and professional exchanges with correctional practitioners all over the world. A personal highlight was the opportunity to meet several renowned experts, such as Dr. Karl Hanson, Dr. Maaïke Helmus and Dr. Derek Perkins. They all have previously collaborated with the clinical psychologists in the Department, and it was encouraging to reconnect with them in person at the Conference. Maintaining professional contacts is important as it helps ensure Hong Kong is in alignment with international developments, and open the door for future collaborative projects in research, assessment and treatment.

In addition, I attended a meet-up organised by the Society for the Advancement of Actuarial Risk/Need Assessment (SAARNA). SAARNA is an international professional body dedicated to improving the quality and consistency of actuarial risk/need assessment tools and their application in forensic and correctional settings. The meet-up underscored the importance of networking in Promoting high standards of risk assessment methodologies, encouraging collaboration among practitioners and researchers, and supporting their ongoing development.

Conclusion

Attending IATSO 2025 provided invaluable opportunities for me to stay updated on cutting-edge research, evidence-based practices and international innovations in the assessment, treatment and prevention of sexual offending. The Conference highlighted the importance of early intervention, multi-disciplinary collaboration and evidence informed decision-making, as well as the need to address evolving challenges such as technology-facilitated offending. These insights offer guidance for enhancing rehabilitation programmes, refining risk assessment practices and exploring preventive initiatives inspired by international models.

Insights

1. Addressing Technology-facilitated Offending

- Equipping ourselves with up-to-date knowledge and strengthening assessment, treatment and prevention approaches to address the increasing trend of online sexual offending in the digital era.

2. Multi-disciplinary Collaboration

- Effective prevention requires joint efforts between psychologists from different governmental department, correctional staff, lawyers and policy makers. Psychologists' evidence-based input can guide decision-making and enhance the effectiveness of interventions.

3. Research Collaboration with Overseas Experts

- Partnering with overseas researchers to support shared research and the exchange of clinical insights that can further strengthen local rehabilitative services for PICS with sex offending behaviours.

