

# Information for Medical Practitioners and Pharmacists on the

## Treatment of Heroin Dependence

**H**eroin dependence is a widespread problem in Australia today. Medical practitioners and pharmacists have an important role in responding constructively to people with problems related to heroin use.

Heroin dependence can devastate the lives of people, particularly young people. Heroin users often resort to crime to finance their habit and there are health complications such as hepatitis C and HIV. Employment, family relationships and friendships also suffer. Overdose is always a risk for people dependent on heroin.

There are effective treatments and all health professionals can assist by providing advice and referral. More crucially, medical practitioners and pharmacists can play a valuable role in providing treatment for their own patients who have become dependent on heroin.

There are significant benefits from medical treatment of heroin dependence, especially methadone and buprenorphine maintenance treatment. Australian and overseas research has shown a number of benefits from these treatments, including:

- reduced illicit drug use
- reduced crime
- reduced risk of overdose
- reduced risk of HIV.

### ***Drug use***

Methadone<sup>1</sup> and buprenorphine<sup>2</sup> treatment enables motivated patients to overcome their dependence on illicit drugs and regain control of their lives.

### ***Crime reduction***

Heavy heroin users inject a number of times a day and require large sums of money to support their habit.

Methadone treatment reduces property and drug crime by a factor of three or four.<sup>1,2</sup> Each year an addict is in treatment their likelihood of offending is reduced.<sup>3</sup>

### ***Reducing overdoses***

A NSW study shows that methadone treatment reduced the risk of drug-related death. Those not in treatment were three times more likely to die from a drug overdose.<sup>4</sup> Buprenorphine treatment also reduces the risk of death from overdose.<sup>2</sup>

### ***Reducing the transmission of AIDS and hepatitis C***

The availability of methadone maintenance treatment and needle and syringe exchange programs has resulted in the successful containment of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Australia is recognised internationally for its effective approach to preventing HIV/AIDS among drug users.

## ***GPs and pharmacists***

GPs and pharmacists now provide methadone and buprenorphine maintenance treatment to over 5,000 people in New South Wales. This mode of delivering pharmacotherapy treatment has a number of advantages:

- the treatment is provided in the context of holistic health care, so that the multiple health needs of methadone patients can be addressed
- there is continuing care from the same providers over time
- treatment can be provided closer to the home or place of work, permitting more 'normal' activities including work, child care and training for employment
- congregation at large clinics is reduced and the patients make less contact with other drug users.

## ***Withdrawal treatment***

Buprenorphine can also be prescribed in 5 to 10 day short courses to assist people to withdraw from heroin in their home setting.

### **References:**

1. Bell J, Ward J, Mattick RP, Hay A, Chan J and Hall W (1995)
2. Report on NEPOD project (July 2001)
3. Bell J, Hall W and Byth K (1992)
4. Caplehorn JRM, Dalton MSYN, Cluff MC and Petrenas AM (1994)

## Contact details

### **Medical Practitioners wishing to become a pharmacotherapy prescriber**

For advice on your training requirements, including face-to-face and web based courses, contact your local Area Health Drug and Alcohol Service or the Department of Medical Education at Sydney University.

Tel. (02) 9351 7317 Fax. (02) 9351 4160

Information is also available at [www.health.nsw.gov.au](http://www.health.nsw.gov.au)

### **Pharmacists wishing to dispense methadone and/or buprenorphine**

Contact: Project Manager, Pharmacy Incentive Scheme,  
Pharmacy Guild NSW Branch. Tel. (02) 9966 8377

### **For further information on pharmacotherapy training contact:**

<b>Central Coast</b> (Wyang,Gosford) (02) 4320 2637	<b>Illawarra</b> (02) 4228 8033	<b>Northern Sydney</b> (02) 9926 6613
<b>Central Sydney</b> (02) 9787 0272	<b>Macquarie</b> 1800 092 881	<b>South Eastern</b> (02) 9332 8777
<b>Far West</b> (08) 8080 1554	<b>Mid North Coast</b> (02) 6648 7223	<b>South Western</b> (02) 9828 4877
<b>Greater Murray</b> (02) 6023 7119	<b>Mid Western</b> (02) 6360 7827	<b>Southern</b> (02) 6299 1725
<b>Hunter</b> (02) 4924 6221	<b>New England</b> (02) 6761 9402	<b>Wentworth</b> (02) 4734 2129
	<b>Northern Rivers</b> (02) 6620 7600	<b>Western Sydney</b> (02) 9840 3355

### **For alcohol and drug information contact**

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) 24 hour hotline

- Tel. (02) 9361 2111 (Sydney)
- Toll free. 1800 422 599 (outside Sydney)