

3rd Network Meeting Heroin Prescription

The role of heroin prescription in a
comprehensive treatment system

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Dr Alex Wodak, St Vincents Hospital
Sydney, Australia

Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are and what they might have been.

William Hazlitt

Role of heroin prescription in a comprehensive treatment system

Potential benefits:

- Effective treatment for treatment refractory heroin users
- Attractive treatment for treatment naïve heroin users who reject current options
- Substantial treatment benefit at community level

Treatment refractory intervention

- Drug treatment substantially benefits drug users, their families and their communities
- Benefits increase as capacity, diversity and quality of drug treatment approaches demand
- Commonalities with other consumer markets: price differentiation; product differentiation; and ‘willingness to pay’
- Major constraints on drug treatment result from global system of punitive drug prohibition
- More and better evidence for pharmacotherapy

Treatment refractory (cont'd)

- Major aim of heroin prescription to assist treatment refractory, severely dependent heroin users
- Most heroin prescription trials based on treatment refractory heroin users
- Switzerland now has: 18,000 methadone, 1,000 inpatient rehabilitation, 1,000 outpatient rehabilitation, 1,000 heroin prescription

Treatment refractory (cont'd)

Summary:

- Benefits to treatment refractory testable
- Efficacy and effectiveness trials
- Supportive evidence increasing
- Now operationalised in one country
- How much scientific evidence needed?

Attracting treatment naïve users

- Inherently attractive hypothesis that recruits treatment naïve users who reject all other treatment options
- Increasing diversity options assists treatment of complex, chronic, relapsing-remitting conditions
- Need to retain in treatment as well as attract
- Doubtful that hypothesis testable
- Summary: no evidence yet that heroin prescription does/does not attract and retain treatment naïve heroin users

Population effect

- Most evaluation of drug treatment effectiveness based on individual benefit
- Some data on population benefit
- Heroin users heterogeneous
- Consider alcohol analogy: 10% heaviest consumers consume 50% alcohol; 20% heaviest consume 70% alcohol
- Tobacco similar

Population effect (cont'd)

- Likely that distribution heroin consumption similarly skewed
- Likely that 20% heaviest heroin consumers account for 70% heroin consumption
- Probably account for >70% crime and >70% recruitment of heroin naïve initiates
- Disproportionate benefit of attracting and recruiting this group into effective treatment

Population effect (cont'd)

- Treatment systems usually based on assumption that maximum population benefit from treatment directed to individuals with minimal severity of condition
- Treatment of heroin users different usual medical conditions because treatment also decreases heroin demand and supply
- Conceptually similarity with control infectious disease e.g. TB

Population effect (cont'd)

- Population benefits of heroin prescription testable
- Population benefits will make heroin prescription easier to accept
- Advocacy based on individual and population benefits, drug policy impact
- Drug policy impact uncertain as heroin prescription in UK since 1926 without discernible impact on drug policy
- Main opposition to heroin prescription is fear of drug policy impact

Remaining questions

- What is the efficacy, safety and cost effectiveness of heroin prescription compared to other options?
- What factors maximise benefits and minimise adverse outcomes e.g. treatment characteristics, patient selection

Conclusions

1. Evidence for efficacy & effectiveness of heroin prescription increasing , not conclusive yet
2. Most evidence for benefit to individuals, some for community
3. Evidence of benefit to treatment refractory, severely dependent heroin users
4. May also attract and retain treatment naïve users who reject all other treatments, un-testable?

Conclusions (cont'd)

5. May also have disproportionate population impact by recruiting & retaining heaviest users in community
6. Some population impact e.g. crime are testable
7. Increases diversity of drug treatment system; only needed for about 5% of treatment system?
8. Impact on drug policy uncertain
9. Main opposition concern that heroin prescription might have impact on drug policy