

PATIENT EXPERIENCES OF OPIOID SUBSTITUTION THERAPY IN PRISON: REASONS FOR SEEKING AND CEASING TREATMENT

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Introduction / Issues: Clinicians providing care to opioid dependent prisoners report that some patients wish to cease opioid substitution therapy (OST) prior to release, despite advice to remain in treatment to mitigate post-release mortality risk. This study aimed to examine patients' reasons for seeking OST, and reasons for treatment cessation prior to release.

Method / Approach: In-depth interviews were undertaken with 47 people in NSW prisons with a history of opioid use. Interviews focused on reasons for seeking (or not seeking) OST while in custody, and preferences with regards to remaining in treatment throughout incarceration and following release. NVIVO10 was used to identify recurrent issues in interviews.

Key Findings: Participants framed their reasons for entering OST in terms of negative outcomes avoided (e.g. avoiding withdrawal symptoms), rather than direct benefits of treatment per se. A third of those currently in OST intended to cease treatment prior to release. Reasons for wishing to cease treatment included perceiving OST as restrictive; preference to be 'drug free'; concerns about potential for relapse in OST; and the stigma associated with methadone specifically. Patients perceived clinicians' reticence to assist with treatment withdrawal prior to release as uncaring and poor treatment planning.

Discussions and Conclusions: These findings highlight the ambivalence that many opioid dependent prisoners feel towards OST. Balancing patient preferences with patient safety and good clinical practice is a major challenge for prison health care providers. Further work is needed to determine how to address patient ambivalence towards post-release OST.

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