



## Treating drug dependence – risky business

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 12 NOON SUNDAY, 4 FEBRUARY**

An implant designed to help drug addicts overcome their dependence could in fact put them at risk of an overdose, according to the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales.

Ms Amy Gibson and her colleagues have identified and researched five deaths involving naltrexone implants, used for treating opioid dependence, between 2000 and 2004.

Their findings are published in the latest *Medical Journal of Australia*.

“Non-compliance with naltrexone is common, and is usually followed by relapse to heroin use,” says Ms Gibson.

Implanted forms of naltrexone are used to reduce non-compliance, prevent relapse to opioid use, and therefore fatal opioid overdose, says Ms Gibson.

However the identified cases indicate that patients can still die from an overdose despite the implant, she says.

All five deaths were related directly to drug use.

“Two deaths occurred while the victims were undergoing naltrexone implant treatment, one shortly after naltrexone implant removal, and two about six months after insertion of an implant.”

Ms Gibson says the deaths indicate the danger that patients may use excessive heroin to overcome the block provided by the implant, but also highlight the risk of a combined drug effect with the naltrexone.

“Although the risk of fatal overdose is probably reduced in naltrexone implant treatment, a risk still exists,” says Ms Gibson.

“Medical professionals have a duty to consider the risks of naltrexone implant treatment and to warn patients of the possibility of opioid overdose death during compliant naltrexone implant treatment as well as after treatment cessation.”

The *Medical Journal of Australia* is a publication of the Australian Medical Association.

The original article can be viewed at [www.mja.com.au](http://www.mja.com.au)

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