



HEROIN OVERDOSES CONTINUE TO FALL NEW FIGURES RELEASED TODAY

For immediate release: 17 December, 2003

364 Australians died from opiate overdoses in 2002, according to new figures released today by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. The rate of accidental deaths due to opioids was a 69% decrease compared to the rate in 1999, and was relatively stable compared to 2001.

Although there was a decrease in the number of overdose deaths across the country, South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory all reported slightly higher figures than in 2001. Victoria recorded the greatest increase in the number of opioid deaths, up by 20, a rise of 27%. Although New South Wales contributed the most deaths (43.4%), the number dropped from 177 to 158.

Dr Louisa Degenhardt, Lecturer at the Centre, presented the findings which reviewed the fatal overdose data which is collected by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and then analysed by NDARC. Results covered issues such as gender, age and state-by-state trends.

“A dramatic decrease in opioid deaths was observed in 2001, and was most probably due to the reduction in the availability of heroin in that year” said Dr Degenhardt. “It is possible that the reduction in heroin supply led to fewer users of heroin and less frequent heroin use among those who continued to use.”

“The reduced purity of heroin might also have been a factor in a reduced risk of overdose, but it is difficult to examine this possibility in detail.”

The maintenance of the low rates of opioid deaths in 2002 is consistent with trends observed in ambulance calls to overdoses and other indicators of related harms such as arrests for heroin possession and use. These data suggest that the reduction in the scale of the heroin market in Australia has been sustained in 2002.

Examination of these trends over time reveal that the dramatic increases and decreases observed over the past decade have been most notable among younger age groups.

“This suggests that targeting supply may not affect older users as much as it does younger users, and that other efforts to reduce use and its related harm are needed,” said Dr Degenhardt.

The largest proportion of overdose deaths occurred in the 25-34 year age range (41%), followed by the 35-44 age group (30%).

“Opiate overdose continues to be a major issue in Australia and every one of these deaths is an individual and family tragedy,” concluded Dr Degenhardt.

“This is not a problem that is going to be solved by any one ‘magic bullet’. We do know that opioid replacement treatments such as methadone, reduce the risk of overdosing by a factor of four. Replacement therapies, as well as other strategies such as counseling and residential treatment, need to be maintained to continue to see a reduction in the number of deaths.”

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