



NATIONAL DRUG AND  
ALCOHOL RESEARCH CENTRE

## **DRUGS EVEN UP DEATH RATES AMONGST MEN AND WOMEN – NEW BOOK RELEASED**

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For immediate release

A new analysis of death rates due to illicit drugs released today has shown that men and women drug users die at the same high rates. In the general population, men have higher death rates than women. The use of drugs appears to 'even' this discrepancy out.

Women are as much at risk of things such as overdose and disease as men, and some increase this risk by becoming involved in activities such as sex work to support their habit. The impact on women is dramatic: drug using women die at about 20 times the rate of other women, while drug using men die at 10 times the rate of other men.

"Drugs such as heroin and methamphetamine have a far greater impact upon women. The risk of death is great for both sexes, but the increase in death rates is much greater for women," said Professor Shane Darke, from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC).

These figures are contained in the first comprehensive book on illicit drug-related mortality which has been released by NDARC through Cambridge University Press (Darke, S., Degenhardt, L. & Mattick, R. (2007) *Mortality amongst illicit drug users: epidemiology, causes and intervention*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

This is the first book to analyse the rates of death due to illicit drug use, what causes these deaths, and to evaluate what has been done to reduce these deaths.

The major causes of death amongst drug users were identified as overdose, disease, suicide and trauma. However, one of the major findings to come out of the research was that 10% of deaths are due to various forms of trauma, such as homicide, motor vehicle accidents and other types of accidents.

"When we think of drug users dying, we typically think of overdose and disease" said Professor Darke, lead author of the book. "About one in ten such deaths, however, are due to trauma such as homicide. We need to recognise that involvement in illicit drugs such as heroin carries enormous risks, and death comes in many different guises."

Despite the international increases in methamphetamine use, opiates remain by far the most dangerous of the illicit drugs, and still contributes to the largest number of deaths.

"We need to keep in mind that opiates such as heroin are the biggest killers. We do have a big problem with methamphetamine. This does *not* mean that the problem of heroin has gone away. In Australia, heroin overdose death rates are now about the same levels as they were in the early 1990s, when it was rightly regarded as a national tragedy", said Professor Darke.

The study found that drug treatment dramatically reduces the risk of death. Less drug use mean that users are less likely to overdose, are less likely to contract diseases from drug use, are less likely to commit suicide and have a reduced risk of death from traumas such as car accidents due to drug driving or from murder.

"The single most effective thing we can do to keep drug users from dying is to get them into treatment. Treatment reduces the risk of death from overdose, from disease, from suicide and from trauma", said Professor Darke.

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**Contact Details: Paul Dillon, tel. (02) 9385 0226 or 0419 402 099, email**  
*p.dillon@unsw.edu.au Date Issued: October 30, 2006*