



WHY DO OLDER HEROIN USERS DIE? – NEW STUDY

4 June, 2006

For release: 5 June, 2006

Heroin overdoses still make the single largest contribution to illicit drug-related mortality and morbidity worldwide. In 2004, 357 Australians died as a result of heroin and other opioids. Many of these deaths occur in older injecting drug users who have used heroin for some time. The question is often asked why do these older, more experienced users die, often when they are using in a very similar way as they have done in the past?

A new study released today may provide the answer.

Increased purity of heroin on the streets and polydrug use (using a number of drugs at the same time) are two factors that obviously play a role, but researchers from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) believe that chronic liver disease could also play an important role in many fatal overdoses.

The study involving an investigation into 841 cases of death due to opioids toxicity between 1998 and 2002 found that a great many of these cases had a range of serious health conditions, some of which could play an important part in the resulting death.

Professor Shane Darke from NDARC at the University of New South Wales believes the findings will contribute to a better understanding of opioids overdose.

“Disease, most prominently liver disease, was common among fatal opioid toxicity cases, and was strongly related to age,” said Professor Darke. “A quarter of older users had liver cirrhosis. The ability of drug users with serious liver disease to metabolise opioids must seriously be questioned and may help explain why it is older users who are most at risk of death.”

A tenth of those aged 35-44 years were diagnosed with cirrhosis, with a quarter of those aged over 44 years having the same condition. Much of this liver disease was due to hepatitis C (HCV).

Not just one organ system was affected. The study identified that multiple organ disease was present in just under a quarter of cases (24.4%). This was strongly related to age, being present in nearly half of the oldest age group.

"As they get older, heroin users continue to develop disease, and are thus at great risk of death due to overdose," said Dr Darke. "This study shows just how harmful heroin dependence is. These people had extremely high levels of serious disease, and many would have died of liver disease if they had not died of an overdose."

"Heroin users have an enormous impact on the health system. This study shows the importance of preventing heroin use, and in getting younger users into treatment so that they do not end up with the levels of disease, and risk of death, they we saw in this study."

ends

Contact Details: Paul Dillon, tel. (02) 9385 0226 or 0419 402 099, email p.dillon@unsw.edu.au *Date Issued: June 4*