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MEDIA RELEASE

Methadone maintenance treatment as a crime control measure

Methadone maintenance treatment (MMT) reduces property and drug-related crime, according to a new report released today by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research.

The report was prepared for the Bureau by Professor Wayne Hall, the Director of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and one of Australia's leading experts in the field of drug-related crime.

MMT is a treatment commonly prescribed to dependant heroin users as a means of reducing their dependence on heroin.

Because heroin is expensive, dependent heroin users often engage in high rates of criminal activity, such as drug dealing, robbery, break and enter, forgery and shoplifting.

Professor Hall argues that when the available evidence is taken as a whole, there are good reasons for believing that, on average, MMT reduces injecting heroin use and criminality.

Although most of the research reviewed by Professor Hall has been conducted in the United States, research in NSW tends to confirm this observation.

One recent Australian study, for example followed 300 patients in three Sydney private MMT programs over a year. Self-reported crime days in the last 30 days on heroin were compared with self-reported crime days in the last 30 days on MMT.

The percentage reporting drug selling declined from 40 per cent to 12 per cent and the percentage engaging in property crimes declined from 35 per cent to 9 per cent.

Subsequent checking of arrest records of the patients involved in the study confirmed the finding that they were much less involved in crime while receiving methadone treatment.

Professor Hall also argues that MMT is probably a much more cost-effective way of reducing crime than legalising the prescription of heroin to dependent users (HMT).

'The effect of the two types of treatment on rates of involvement in crime may be comparable but the costs involved in providing HMT are of the order of two to three times higher than those of providing MMT,' he said.

Although the research evidence supports the proposition that MMT reduces crime, any decision to expand the availability of MMT as a crime control measure should have regard to two important considerations, according to Professor Hall.

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‘Firstly, too rapid an expansion of the methadone program beyond current levels may provoke a backlash amongst members of the community unaware of the benefits of the methadone program. It is important that public education for the benefits of the public methadone program proceed in tandem with its expansion’.

‘Secondly, methadone is best provided in a setting which provides counselling and other services designed to reduce the level of heroin dependence. Resources need to be provided to ensure that these services are made available along with methadone,’ Professor Hall said.

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