

Context

Around 10,000 people receive treatment for opiate dependence from the state each year.ⁱ Opiate substitution therapy (OST)(using methadone) was formalised in 1998 and is delivered by drug treatment centres and accredited GPs. However, injecting drug use, chaotic lifestyles, overdose and drug related deaths remain common and continue to devastate families in Dublin and elsewhere.

The Health Committee's interest is welcome and highlights a health problem for Irish society which attracts little interest or urgency.

I wish to highlight four issues of relevance.

1. Injecting rooms

Evidence is building that injecting rooms are an effective harm reduction measure for certain groups of injecting drug users. This initiative should be supported in Ireland. The initiative is a measure to assist those with chaotic or uncontrolled drug use – it may have a limited impact on the more fundamental problems facing the health service in relation to drug dependence..

2. Discontinuing Opiate Substitution Therapy

Methadone treatment has come to be seen almost as an end in itself. Few services or incentives exist to support doctors, therapists or patients in reducing and then stopping methadone or in the recovery phase thereafter. I have no wish to undermine the key role that methadone plays in helping opiate dependent patients to normalise their lives – but OST should not be a de facto life sentence. Research and service development to achieve this goal for those who are interested should be prioritised.

3. Opiate overdose – access to naloxone

Naloxone is a rescue drug which can reverse the respiratory depression caused by opiates but must be given within minutes. In Ireland, more people die from opiate overdose each year than in road accidentsⁱⁱ. In 2013, 387 poisoning deaths occurred, of which 203 involved opiates and 93 deaths involved methadone. Access to naloxone drug is inappropriately restricted in Ireland and urgent action is needed to allow, for example:

- GMS access to the drug
- co-prescription with methadone
- prescription to the family or friends of those on methadone

4. Investigation into opiate overdose deaths

Any patient receiving OST who dies from an overdose has died in the care of the state's mental health services. Each of those deaths must be regarded as a Serious Adverse Event and should be investigated in precisely the same manner as, for example, a suicide which occurs in a patient attending HSE psychiatry services. The purpose is to identify learning areas for service improvement among all of the carer agencies.

ⁱ 2014 National Report to the EMCDDA (2013 data) by the Reitox National Focal Point, Ireland. HRB 2014.

ⁱⁱ Drug related deaths and deaths among drug users in Ireland (013 data). HRB 2015.