

Australia should start providing Heroin Assisted Treatment

Why Australia should provide Heroin Assisted Treatment to severely dependent heroin users after all other treatment options haven't worked.

Heroin Assisted Treatment involves supervising prescribed pharmaceutical heroin self-administration with intensive psycho-social help to a minority of people with severe heroin dependence who have not benefitted from multiple other treatments.

The signatories of this letter include senior clinicians and researchers, major health organisations, peer based organisations and people with long standing experience and expertise in the fields of law enforcement, drug policy and drug treatment.

We support the urgent introduction of Heroin Assisted Treatment in Australia.

Twenty years ago this month in August 1997, the then Federal Cabinet decided against notifying the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs of an intention to conduct an Australian trial of Heroin Assisted Treatment. Consequently, the proposed trial had to be abandoned.

Since then, trials of supervised heroin assisted treatment in seven countries with a combined total of more than 1,500 people using street heroin have found that this treatment was more effective than high quality methadone treatment for people with severe heroin dependence who had not benefitted from multiple other treatments.

Heroin Assisted Treatment, as well as more recently treatment with other injectable opioids, has been demonstrated to improve physical and mental health, reduce the use of street heroin, reduce criminal activity and improve social functioning. This treatment also saves a lot more money than it costs to provide or the current cost to the community of not treating people with severe heroin dependence.

Heroin Assisted Treatment is only needed for a small minority of the heroin using population. However, research in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Canada, Belgium and the UK has shown its benefit for individuals, families and communities is often quite profound.

In the last twenty years, notwithstanding some important advances, Australia's drug policy decisions have generally failed to take heed of the evidence. As a result, the drug market has been expanding its reach and continually developing new and more dangerous drugs. In addition, similar to many other countries, the number of heroin and other opioid overdose deaths here have once again been increasing.

Heroin Assisted Treatment is not the first option treatment for people using heroin who want help to regain control of their lives. It is however our most effective option when other treatments haven't worked.

It is now clear from all the international evidence available that the 1997 Federal Cabinet made the wrong decision regarding a trial of Heroin Assisted Treatment. As a result, far too many lives have been lost, far too many families have been left devastated and far too much harm has befallen our communities.

It's time to correct that decision and introduce Heroin Assisted Treatment in Australia now.

