

Capital addicts get help at home

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Intravenous drug users in Canberra will be the first in Australia to be issued with take-home packs of the "overdose reversal" drug naloxone.

ACT Chief Minister and Health Minister Katy Gallagher announced yesterday that the territory would conduct a two-year trial of the drug, also known as narcan, among the capital's addicts.

In 2009, the latest year when figures are available, ACT Ambulance responded to more than 110 heroin overdose emergencies and drug and alcohol workers say that an Australian dies every day from the effects of the narcotic.

There are also signs that users are obtaining and using naloxone themselves with the ACT Ambulance Service reporting about 70 incidents since January 2010 where evidence was found of the drug being used to reverse heroin overdoses.

Ms Gallagher said yesterday that the territory would be the first Australian jurisdiction to undertake a large-scale experiment in distributing the take-home packs to addicts and their friends.

The drug can reverse the effects of an overdose within a minute, much quicker than an ambulance could arrive on the scene. Advocates claim that in US states, more than 10,000 "overdose reversals" have been achieved from the distribution of just over 50,000 kits.

"This is the first trial in Australia, it is happening internationally and I think the United States have been the biggest takers of a trial like this," Ms Gallagher said. "Essentially, the idea is that we make available to peers of injecting drug users naloxone, which is provided through medical authorities if their friends overdose.

"It's essentially giving people the power to provide some emergency treatment, what paramedics do when they're called to a drug overdose, but in a community setting."

The trial is envisaged to take 200 injecting drug users or their peers and train them, in groups of 10, in the safe administration of the naloxone with kits distributed by a GP to those who have achieved a level of competence.

Ms Gallagher conceded that there had been problems with aggressive reactions from overdose victims revived with naloxone but said that the trial would evaluate all aspects of the drug's use. "That's why we're going with the trial and the trial will be evaluated but one thing we do know is that drug users and their peers are very experienced in how to inject and how to respond to different outcomes of those injections," she said. "I think there's no better qualified people in the community to understand those issues than drug users and their peers."

Ms Gallagher's push for a needle and syringe program at the territory's jail remains bogged down amid a stalemate with some of the prison's guards who have pledged to sabotage a needle exchange scheme if it were introduced.

Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Association of the ACT executive officer Carrie Fowlie said yesterday that her group had been a driving force behind the decision to run a naloxone trial and that the drug had the potential to save lives in Canberra.

"We still have one death every day from heroin in Australia and this is the sort of evidence-based program that has been proven to work overseas," she said.

"In some of the American studies, they've distributed say 50,000 kits and those kits have been responsible for 10,000 overdose reversals."

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