

# Research and Evidence Summaries

## September 2011

**Note:** Most of the reports and research items referenced within this eBulletin are available from the Alcohol and Other Drug Council of Australia's National Drugs Sector Information Service (NDSIS) <http://ndsis.adca.org.au>.

### **Are people in police detention more likely to have used pharmaceutical drugs illegally than the community in general?**

Under the Australian Institute of Criminology's Drug Use Monitoring in Australia (DUMA) program, 986 police detainees were interviewed, of whom 19 per cent 'reported having recently used pharmaceutical drugs for non-medical purposes'.

The report of this research concludes 'non-medical prescription drug use was found to be substantially higher in the detainee population by comparison with the general community. Among the detainees surveyed, more prescription drug users were unemployed, derived their income from welfare or benefits, considered themselves drug dependent, were currently on a drug-related charge and had been arrested or imprisoned in the previous 12 months by comparison with non-users. Most pharmaceuticals were sourced from family and friends or from the person's usual doctor and pharmacy. There was little support for the view that pharmaceuticals are commonly obtained through script forgery or over the internet. Benzodiazepines, followed by opioids, were the most commonly used pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes in this sample of police detainees'.

McGregor, C, Gately, N & Fleming, J 2011, *Prescription drug use among detainees: prevalence, sources and links to crime*, Australian Institute of Criminology, Canberra, <http://aic.gov.au/en/publications/current%20series/tandi/421-440/tandi423.aspx>.

### **Why do so few people with cannabis use disorders use treatment services?**

Recent research examined barriers and facilitators to entry into cannabis treatment in Australia. Surveys were carried out of regular cannabis users in treatment, in the community and via the internet. The results were that 'Perceived barriers included: not being aware of treatment options; thinking treatment is unnecessary; not wanting to stop using cannabis; and wanting to avoid the stigma associated with accessing treatment. Perceived facilitators included: improving available information on treatment; keeping treatment specific to cannabis; offering additional services, such as telephone support; and simplifying treatment admission processes'.

Gates, P, Copeland, J, Swift, W & Martin, G 2011, 'Barriers and facilitators to cannabis treatment', *Drug and Alcohol Review*, online ahead of print.

### **What's the latest on depression, anxiety and substance abuse treatment?**

The 1 August 2011 issue of the *Medical Journal of Australia* contains a supplement on this topic with the subheading 'Psychiatry meets addiction medicine in these postcards from the edge'.

Twelve short articles cover a range of areas of co-occurring disorders.

Clarke, DM & Matthew Y Frei (eds) 2011, 'Supplement: depression, anxiety and substance use', *Medical Journal of Australia*, vol. 195, no. 3.

### **How many people die in Australia as a result of drug use?**

The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre has released a report on drug-induced deaths that were registered in 2007, developed from ABS data. In accordance with the ABS definition, 'drug-induced deaths' do not include deaths related to alcohol or tobacco use. In summary, 'There were 976 deaths nationally among Australians of all ages in which drugs were determined to be the underlying cause of death and 743 among Australians aged 15 to 54 years'. Of these deaths, 512 (52%) among all Australians and 412 (55%) among Australians aged 15 to 54 years were determined to be *accidental* drug-induced deaths. 224 (23%) of the deaths of all Australians and 138 (19%) among Australians aged 15 to 54 years were determined to be due to *intentional self-harm*. 299 (58%) of the accidental drug-induced deaths (overdoses) had opioids as the underlying cause.

Roxburgh, A & Burns, L 2011, *Drug-induced deaths in Australia, 2007 edition*, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW, Sydney, [http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/NDARCWeb.nsf/resources/Bulletins1/\\$file/NDARC+deaths+Bulletin+2007.pdf](http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/NDARCWeb.nsf/resources/Bulletins1/$file/NDARC+deaths+Bulletin+2007.pdf).

### **Is prohibition the only, or the best, option for dealing with new designer drugs?**

Following the lead of the Commonwealth Government, the ACT recently prohibited a range of synthetic cannabinoids—drugs that have effects that are something like those of cannabis. The emergence of these so-called ‘legal highs’ is a challenge facing governments and communities across the world. The UK Drug Policy Commission (an NGO) issued a report recently, pointing out that ‘As quickly as policy makers seek to control new substances through [drugs legislation], others are being manufactured and put on the market. The effects of these new substances are unknown and untested; it is this uncertainty combined with easy accessibility that presents major challenges to public safety. However, these challenges also provide an opportunity to look again at drug control policy without a rerun of redundant debates about whether to be “tough” or “soft” on drugs. Instead, this report adopts a systems approach and considers drug policy as a “wicked issue” to which there is no solution, and no ultimate winners or losers.’

The report is accompanied by a research paper by Peter Reuter canvassing the range of policy options for addressing this pressing problem. He covers four main approaches: Foodstuffs regulations (with a presumption of safety), regulation of specific commodities such as alcohol and tobacco, medicines regulations (safety/efficacy must be proven), and regulation of illicit substances.

Birdwell, J, Chapman, J & Singleton, N 2011, *Taking drugs seriously: a Demos and UK Drug Policy Commission report on legal highs*, Demos, London, and Reuter, P 2011, *Options for regulating new psychoactive drugs: a review of recent experiences*, UK Drug Policy Commission, London, <http://www.ukdpc.org.uk/publications.shtml#legalhighs> .

### **Are Australians drinking and smoking less but using illicit drugs more?**

The *2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report* reveals that ‘In 2010, the proportion of people aged 14 years or older smoking daily (15.1%) declined, continuing a downward trend that began in 1995. The decline in daily smoking was largest for those aged in their early-20s to mid-40s, while the proportion of those aged over 45 years who smoked daily remained relatively stable or slightly increased between 2007 and 2010. Despite the decline in the proportion of people in Australia smoking tobacco, the number of smokers has remained stable between 2007 and 2010, at about 3.3 million’.

‘The proportion of the population aged 14 years or older who consumed alcohol daily declined between 2007 (8.1%) and 2010 (7.2%). However, there was little change in the proportion of people drinking alcohol at levels that put them at risk of harm over their lifetime (20.3% in 2007 and 20.1% in 2010), or from a single drinking occasion at least once a month (28.7% in 2007 and 28.4% in 2010). As the Australian population has increased, the number of people drinking at risky levels increased between 2007 and 2010. Around 7% of recent drinkers changed their drink preference, shifting away from pre-mixed spirits; this preference was particularly evident for those aged less than 29 years.

Recent illicit drug use increased in 2010, mainly due to an increase in the proportion of people who had used cannabis (from 9.1% in 2007 to 10.3% in 2010), pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes (3.7% to 4.2%), cocaine (1.6% to 2.1%) and hallucinogens (0.6% to 1.4%). However, recent ecstasy use decreased, and there was no change in the use of meth/amphetamines, heroin, ketamine, GHB, inhalants and injecting drug use.’

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011, *2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report*, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Canberra, <http://www.aihw.gov.au/publication-detail/?id=32212254712&tab=2>. Large file warning: 4.6 MB.