

Physician-Patient Relationships After Safer Supply Scale-Back

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Background:

Safer supply is a harm reduction approach that emerged in Canada in the early 2020s to, most commonly, provide pharmaceutical alternatives to unregulated and increasingly toxic illicit drugs for the purposes of overdose prevention. This program has since been revised and scaled back due to political concerns under the pretext of 'diversion', and such abrupt changes are bound to affect the physician-patient relationship. We examine how subsequent reduction in tablet hydromorphone prescribing impacted patients' relationships with their physicians and access to healthcare.

Approach:

From July to December 2025 we conducted semi-structured interviews with 42 individuals who had been recently cut off or deprescribed from safer supply medication (tablet hydromorphone) following changes in prescribing guidance and related policies. We drew on structural vulnerability and social constructivist theories to examine consequences for drug use practices, overdose risk, and healthcare access. Data were thematically analyzed using a team approach and NVivo software.

Analysis:

Preliminary results show the process of being cut off or deprescribed had broad impacts, ranging from increased overdose risk from toxic unregulated drugs in the immediate aftermath to prolonged disengagement with medical professionals. The deprescribing process often fomented adversarial physician-client relationships, with participants perceiving the deprescribing process as an unjust penalty mechanism that placed their lives and livelihoods at risk. Even in the face of increased difficulties, current or former safer supply patients who were reticent to return to their prescriber reported losing trust in health care as harm reduction. Avoidance of or disruptions in general health care were additional adverse outcomes of safer supply scale back.

Conclusion:

Recent politically-driven changes to health care resulted in indirect consequences, negatively impacting many patient-physician relationships and increasing patients' risk of overdose. Overall, patients' loss of faith or trust in the medical system strains efforts to engage them in any health care support.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The authors do not report any conflicts of interest.