Substance use and health outcomes following release from custody: the Release study

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Introduction: Release from custody for those with opioid use disorder is associated with elevated risk of substance use, overdose and treatment disengagement. These risks are greatly reduced by continuous opioid dependence treatment (ODT). The Release study examined post release treatment outcomes and substance use.

Methods: Adults receiving ODT in custody were recruited pre-release from New South Wales correctional centres and eligible for interview if they received ODT within 16 weeks post-release. Surveys assessed ODT retention, substance use (Australian Treatment Outcomes Profile), overdose, health and social outcomes.

Results: 243 participants were surveyed, age M=37±8 years); 81% male; 49% Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. Mean length of recent incarceration was 24(±30) months, in-custody inductees onto ODT was mainly long-acting injectable buprenorphine (LAIB) (123/132), most (207/243) were retention at 12 weeks was high : methadone (39/42) and LAIB (168/201). In the past month, 50% reported any alcohol use, 49% cannabis, 46% amphetamines, and 22% heroin use. Among those with a previous history of overdose, 43/109 reported an opioid overdose in the first month post-release. Of concern 22% experienced homelessness and 22% reported re-arrest within the follow-up period.

Engagement with health services varied, with 56% attending a general practitioner and 30% accessing individual counselling.

Discussions and Conclusions: High overall ODT retention was noted, nonetheless, participants reported ongoing substance use, overdose risk and social instability following release. Treatment retention alone is insufficient to mitigate post-release risks.

Implications on practice, policy and/or First Nations communities: Enhanced transitional care models are needed, including overdose prevention, housing support and psychosocial interventions. Findings support targeted investment in continuity-of-care initiatives for people leaving custody, important given the over-representation of Aboriginal people in custody.

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