National trends in the Australian Opioid Agonist Treatment Program, 2013 to 2022

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Introduction: There are limited longitudinal data on national patterns of opioid agonist treatment (OAT). We describe 10-year trends in the sales of OAT medicines in Australia.

Method: A descriptive and time-series analysis of methadone, sublingual (SL) buprenorphine (+/-naloxone), and long-acting injectable (LAI) buprenorphine sold in Australia between 2013 and 2022 was performed. Total units sold were used to estimate the number of OAT clients/month, based on average doses.

Results: Between January 2013 and December 2022 the estimated number of clients on: any OAT increased by 41% to 52,345, methadone remained stable (-8.5%), SL buprenorphine increased (+78%), and LAI buprenorphine increased substantially after September 2019 (+2342%). In January 2013, 78% of OAT clients received methadone. By December 2022, 48% received methadone, 26% SL buprenorphine, and 26% LAI buprenorphine. From 2013 to 2022, OAT clients per capita per month were highest in NSW, ACT and VIC, and lowest in NT and WA. Over the study period, greater increases in OAT were observed in very remote areas (88%) compared to major cities (53%). The number of clients accessing OAT in non-community pharmacy settings remained stable from 2013 to 2019/20, before increasing markedly. The introduction of LAI buprenorphine was associated with an immediate-sustained increase of 1636 OAT clients/month, with a further increase of 190 OAT clients/month.

Conclusions: Patterns of OAT have shifted over the last 10-years with buprenorphine (SL/LAI) now the most common OAT used in Australia. Since the introduction of LAI buprenorphine, OAT utilisation has increased, particularly in non-community pharmacy and remote areas.

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ETHICAL STATEMENT

Ethics approval was not required as the sales data provided by IQVIA were received in deidentified aggregated form.