

Clients' experiences of long-acting injectable buprenorphine to treat opioid dependence: An Australian qualitative study

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Introduction / Issues: Long-acting injectable depot buprenorphine represents an important new treatment option for the management of opioid dependence. However, little is known about clients' experiences of depot buprenorphine and its embodied effects. This qualitative study aims to explore clients' experiences of depot buprenorphine treatment, including how it feels within the body and experiences of dosing cycles across time.

Method / Approach: Participants were recruited from sites in Sydney, regional New South Wales, and Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Thirty participants (16 men, 14 women; mean age 47.3 years) participated in semi-structured interviews. Participants had histories of both heroin and prescription opioid use, and previous opioid agonist therapy including daily dosing of buprenorphine and methadone.

Key Findings OR Results: Our work illuminates: (1) how expectations/concerns about treatment are linked to past embodied experiences of withdrawal and uncertainty about the effectiveness of depot buprenorphine; (2) the diverse meanings attributed to the depot buprenorphine substrate 'under the skin'; and, (3) how depot buprenorphine is embedded within a wider ecology of care in treatment settings.

Discussions and Conclusions: Our analysis destabilises commonplace assumptions about a linear, causal relationship between the pharmacological action of depot buprenorphine and experiences of treatment. Instead, it highlights clients' variable experiences of depot buprenorphine, tracing how treatment experiences materialise in diverse ways, depending on client context/environment. We conclude with some reflections on the implications of our analysis for alcohol and other drug clinical practice, specifically how they might inform the design of client education materials and care.

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