

Overview: Managed Opioid Programs



Managed opioid programs using prescription hydromorphone, diacetylmorphine and/or morphine successfully achieve health and safety goals by:

- Reducing the risk of poisoning death from toxic substances bought on the unregulated market
- Eliminating many of the negative consequences that arise from persons constantly seeking to avoid opioid withdrawal
- Facilitating opportunities to engage in care and treatment via psychosocial supports

By stabilizing the craving-withdrawal cycle, managed opioid programs undercut the unregulated market and have been found to reduce crimes such as shoplifting, thefts, robberies, drug dealing and/or sex work. Substantial financial benefits are found in the enforcement and justice sectors.

The use of diacetylmorphine is supported by approximately 25 years of positive evidence that include randomized control trials. While no single addiction treatment is effective for all individuals, several studies demonstrate superior results compared to methadone.

Hydromorphone use is more common in Canada, producing similar results as diacetylmorphine, and with less risk of serious adverse effects. Supervised use is typical for both medications.

Managed opioid programs (MOP) can make a significant contribution to evidence-based interventions such as supervised consumption or injection services. A MOP is not a replacement for them.

There is strong evidence that supervised injectable opioid agonist therapy (siOAT) programs:

- Are effective for persons who are labelled 'hard to reach, hard to treat'
- Are cost effective compared to the cost of untreated opioid addiction
- Have high retention rates
- Reduce criminal activity and public disorder
- Reduce the use of illegal substances, including non-opioid substances
- Reduce homelessness
- Improve employment rates
- Improve a range of health and well-being outcomes
- Reduce overdose deaths
- Facilitate entry to addiction treatment options and/or abstinence

There are three types of Managed Opioid Programs in Canada:

1. Supervised injectable opioid agonist therapy (siOAT) with hydromorphone or diacetylmorphine are typically treatment-focussed programs serving a small number of people, primarily patients for whom methadone and/or buprenorphine-naloxone (Suboxone®) has not been successful.
2. The B.C. Centre for Disease Control and Health Canada will pilot a low-threshold hydromorphone program that aims to reach a large number of people. The primary goal is to prevent poisoning deaths, engage persons in private residences – the scene of most fatal overdoses- and provide a bridge into care and/or treatment.
3. One Ontario site offers oral and injectable hydromorphone to participants accessing shelter services. The program has aspects of both harm reduction and treatment approaches similar to Canadian ‘managed alcohol programs.’

Status in Canada:

- Health Canada has eased restrictions on diacetylmorphine prescribing and made the treatment an option following successful trials in Montreal and Vancouver. Health Canada approvals are not required for off-label use of hydromorphone however some provincial-level regulatory issues have been identified. Obtaining diacetylmorphine is expensive and difficult in Canada.
- British Columbia has directed local health authorities to establish siOAT programs. Alberta’s siOAT programs are supported by provincial funding.
- Ontario and other provinces do not yet facilitate or fund siOAT programs. One program in Ontario is supported by LHIN (Local Health Integration Network) funding.

Key Links:

- Study to Assess Long-term Opioid Maintenance Effectiveness (SALOME), Canada
- North American Opiate Medication Initiative (NAOMI), Canada
- An emergency response to the opioid overdose crisis in Canada: a regulated opioid distribution program. Canadian Medical Association Journal (2018)
- Facing fentanyl: should the USA consider trialling prescription heroin? Lancet Psychiatry (2018)
- Evidence Brief: Effectiveness of siOAT for opioid use disorder, Public Health Ontario (2017)
- Saving lives, improving health, reducing crime; Transform Drug Policy Foundation (2017)
- Heroin-assisted treatment, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2012)
- Heroin maintenance for chronic heroin-dependent individuals, Cochrane Review (2011)



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