**Understanding how long-acting depot buprenorphine impacts the high-risk post-release period- Protocol for The Release Study**

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**Introduction:** People with opioid use disorder are at elevated risk of overdose following release from custody. Opioid agonist treatment (methadone and buprenorphine) is protective against overdose but resource intensive to administer safely in custodial settings. Long-acting depot buprenorphine (depot-BPN) has been shown to be safe with low risk of diversion in correctional settings and effective in NSW community settings. While prescription in NSW prisons is increasing, it is unknown whether depot-BPN will be as effective as methadone when people return to community-based opioid treatment. There are concerns that depot-BPN may allow patients to disengage from treatment, increasing the risk of relapse and reincarceration.

**Design and Methods:** The Release Study is a prospective observational multisite study that will follow opioid dependent patients released from custody and compare outcomes for patients released on depot-BPN to patients released on methadone to determine the comparative effectiveness of both forms of treatment. The primary endpoint is retention in drug treatment in the community (primary endpoint). Secondary outcomes include substance use, overdose, mortality, health service utilisation, return to custody, and the costs consequences of these interventions. As depot-BPN is being increasingly prescribed in prisons it is important and timely to understand if retention in treatment is acceptable.

**Ethics and dissemination:** Ethical approval will be sought from the Justice Health and Forensic Mental Health Network Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), the NSW Population and Health Services HREC, the Hunter New England HREC, the Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council HREC, and the Corrective Services NSW Ethics Committee.

**Implications for Practice:** These findings will build on emerging research regarding the positive impact of more flexible OAT programs.

**Implications for Translational Research**: As depot-BPN is being prescribed in prisons, especially due to recent demand for treatment during COVID-19, it is important and timely to understand if retention in treatment is acceptable (like methadone) or poor (like sublingual-BPN).

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