

Illicit drug use and overdose outcomes at MSIR during Melbourne's COVID19 lockdown: results from the RAPID early warning system

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Introduction and Aims:

The aims of this study were to (1) document the types of drugs being used at the North Richmond Medically Supervised Injecting Room (MSIR) during the COVID19 lockdown.

Design and Methods: Drug use measures were drawn residue testing of drug use paraphernalia collected at and around the MSIR. Each week for 24 weeks, between 75-100 syringes were collected. The residue in used syringes was analysed using DART-MS.

Key Findings: Drug residue detections at MSIR revealed a reduction in heroin detections during lockdown. Analysis of signal intensity, as a proxy for heroin purity measure suggests a reduction in heroin purity over the lockdown period. Testing documented the emergence of etizolam in the MSIR. At the same time, a novel synthetic opioid (an U-10 isomer) was detected at MSIR. When heroin supply resumed in mid-november both etizolam and U-10 detections dropped substantially.

Overdose rates during this whole period were extremely low, falling from 3% of MSIR visits to 0.5%, presumably because of the low heroin purity throughout.

Discussions and Conclusions: There was a clear disruption to the drug market around North Richmond during the Melbourne lockdown of July to September 2019. This was evidenced by the change in pattern of drugs disclosed to be injected at the MSIR, the change in overdose rates in the MSIR, and in the discarded syringes in and around the MSIR.

Implications for policy: Monitoring the patterns of drug use in the MSIR, the overdose rate at the MSIR, and the types of drug residues in discarded injection equipment in and around the MSIR can each offer timely ways of monitoring changes in the drug market, and present options for routine drug market surveillance.

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