Trends in fentanyl availability, use, and harms in Australia

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Introduction and Aims: Increasing rates of overdose involving fentanyl are causing considerable concern in North America. These concerns are amplified with increasing availability of illicitly manufactured fentanyl analogues. There has been no recent triangulation of data across various indicators to understand trends in pharmaceutical fentanyl use and harms in Australia, nor to identify evidence of illicitly manufactured fentanyl analogue availability or use.

Method: Data are drawn from various sources to explore trends over time in fentanyl availability, use and harms in Australia. These include data from the online darknet marketplaces; annual interviews with people who regularly inject drugs (Illicit Drug Reporting System; IDRS); needle-syringe program client visits; and from the National Coronial Information System.

Results: Fentanyl comprises a small market share on darknet marketplaces relative to other illicit substances (e.g., cannabis and other pharmaceuticals); non-pharmaceutical fentanyl is available but few Australian vendors have these products listed. Around one-tenth of the IDRS sample have reported last six-month use of pharmaceutical fentanyl preparations in annual interviews since 2013, with even fewer reporting recent injection. A higher percentage reporting recent use has been observed in certain jurisdictions (e.g., New South Wales) more recently. Number of needle-syringe programme visits where clients report injecting fentanyl has increased but remains a small proportion of total visits. Analyses of fentanyl-related deaths are underway.

Discussions and Conclusions: Pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical forms of fentanyl are available on darknet marketplaces, although there is evidence of limited availability from Australian vendors. Data from people who inject drugs suggest stable (IDRS data) or slightly increasing (needle-syringe programme data) rates of use nationally, although jurisdiction level variation is evident.

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