

Consumer and pharmacist experiences of opioid agonist treatment in New South Wales community pharmacies

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Introduction and Aims: For over forty years, opioid pharmacotherapy has been a commonly prescribed long-term treatment for opioid dependence provided in New South Wales pharmacies. This study explored the perspectives of community pharmacists and consumers to identify the service elements that enhanced or impaired treatment satisfaction and retention.

Design and Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten pharmacists and fifteen consumers who had experience of opioid agonist treatment within New South Wales community pharmacies. Transcripts were thematically analysed.

Key Findings: Consumers valued the social inclusivity that the pharmacy setting afforded and appreciated pharmacists who were respectful and demonstrated trust. Although consumers described experiences of unfair systems and poor professional conduct, and wanted more treatment choice and flexibility, pharmacies were preferred over public or private clinics for reasons of accessibility, discretion, provision of takeaway doses, and increased consumer choice. Pharmacists found the service rewarding, describing the development of friendly and caring relationships and observations of consumer wellbeing improvements as key, but also felt limited or inadequately informed in this role and wanted more holistic care services for consumers. Both considered service cost to be a problem, with low financial returns a barrier to expanding services and fees contributing to consumer hardship. The most positive experiences tended to involve rural pharmacies or individuals who went beyond expectations to show care.

Discussions and Conclusions: While minimising stigma in opioid pharmacotherapy services was considered most necessary, it was the interpersonal qualities of the service relationship that were most valued by pharmacists and consumers.

Implications for Practice or Policy (optional): Consistent and transparent opioid agonist treatment systems, that minimise differential treatment and misunderstandings and promote relationships of trust and respect, are important to pharmacists and consumers. Service fee regulation and greater compensation may increase satisfaction, as may enhancing information and support systems and expanding treatment options and flexibility.

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