

## Recent trends in the availability of, and harms related to, prescription opioids and benzodiazepines in Australia

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**Introduction and Aims:** The non-medical use of pharmaceutical drugs is an ongoing public health problem in Australia. In particular, opioids and benzodiazepines may be associated with harms, including hospitalisation and mortality. This analysis explores trends in the availability of prescription opioids and benzodiazepines and specific harms.

**Design and Methods:** Trends in prescription dispensing, ambulance attendances, drug-related hospitalisations and drug-induced deaths for opioids and benzodiazepines were analysed using data from the: Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme dataset; National Ambulance Surveillance System for Alcohol and Other Drug Misuse and Overdose; National Hospital Morbidity Database; and National Mortality Database, respectively. Ambulance attendance trend data are available for reporting for the first time in 2021 for jurisdictions with available data.

**Results:** In 2019–20, 15.2 million prescriptions were dispensed for opioids and 5.5 million for benzodiazepines. Between 2014–15 and 2019–20, rates of opioid and benzodiazepine dispensing declined. However, these drugs were consistently among the most commonly involved substances in alcohol and other drug-related ambulance attendances, hospitalisations and deaths. Across the period: the rate of opioid prescriptions dispensed was consistently higher than for benzodiazepines; there were higher rates of ambulance attendances, hospitalisations and deaths involving benzodiazepines compared to opioids.

**Discussion and Conclusions:** In Australia, benzodiazepines are less commonly dispensed than prescription opioids and dispensing of both drugs has declined over time. However, benzodiazepines are more likely to be associated with serious harms, including mortality. Ongoing monitoring using these data sources may help to inform harm minimisation strategies to mitigate risks associated with prescription drug use.

**Disclosure of Interest:** None to disclose.