

## **Experiences of opioid substitution therapy during COVID-19: Insights from a 'big-qual' analysis of online community fora**

ANTHONY BARNETT<sup>1,2</sup>, MICHAEL SAVIC<sup>1,2</sup>, SAM CAMPBELL<sup>1,2</sup>, NIK SURESH<sup>1,2</sup>, KIRAN PIENAAR<sup>3,4</sup>, RAMEZ BATHISH<sup>1,2</sup>, DAN LUBMAN<sup>1,2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Eastern Health Clinical School, Monash University, Box Hill, VIC, <sup>2</sup>Turning Point, Eastern Health, Richmond, VIC, <sup>3</sup>School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia; <sup>4</sup>School of Social Sciences, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia.

**Presenter's email:** [anthony.barnett@monash.edu](mailto:anthony.barnett@monash.edu)

**Introduction / Issues:** Measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic, including physical distancing and self-isolation, have particularly significant impacts on people with chronic conditions who rely on healthcare. People prescribed opioid substitution therapy (OST) to treat opioid dependence, who already have to comply with strict treatment regimens (e.g., daily dosing), are once such group. However, OST clients' experiences of care and access to supports during COVID-19 remains under-researched.

**Method / Approach:** We adopt a novel, 'big qual' machine-learning technique to analyse the accounts of OST clients in online Reddit communities. In particular, we trace experiences of OST during the COVID-19 pandemic across Australia, the US and other countries.

**Key Findings:** Our analysis illustrates that strict OST care regimes can give rise to deleterious effects during COVID-19, such as reinforcing stigma and discrimination. However, new technologies (e.g., long-acting injectable buprenorphine) potentially make treatment less onerous, but are difficult to access in certain contexts (e.g., in countries where health insurance is required). In contrast to OST clients' experiences of formal healthcare, the kinds of empathic care practised in online community interactions offer noteworthy examples of peer-driven support during COVID-19.

**Discussions and Conclusions:** We conclude by considering ways to counter the challenges COVID-19 restrictions on OST clients, including the potential role of online communities as sources of support. We also reflect on the methodological implications of 'big qual' techniques to analyse large qualitative datasets.

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