



AN INSIDE VIEW

Vol. 14, No. 1, 2009

Methadone Maintenance: Misunderstood by Most

Methadone is a synthetic opioid medication used for the treatment of persons who have become addicted to opioids. There are four categories¹ of opioids:

1. endogenous (endorphins), which occur naturally in the body
2. opium alkaloids (morphine and codeine) derived from the poppy
3. semi-synthetic (heroin and oxycodone), which are modified forms of opium alkaloids
4. fully synthetic (methadone and meperidine)

While opioids are an effective pain reliever prescribed by doctors, people who use them can become depressed and can have difficulty concentrating and sleeping, which has a great impact on their family, work and social functioning. Many people who are on pain management therapy develop physical and even psychological dependency as a side-effect they are willing to live with.

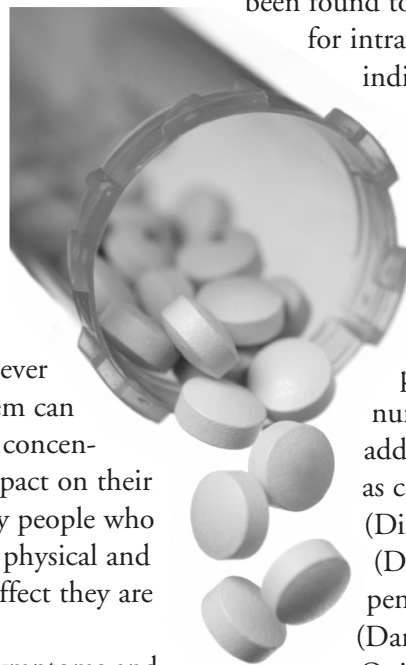
Methadone alleviates the withdrawal symptoms and chronic craving for opioids of persons who have become

dependent, allowing individuals to focus their energy on regaining stability in other life areas. It is medically prescribed and administered orally once a day.

Methadone Maintenance Treatment (MMT) has been found to be a cost effective treatment option both for intravenous opioid dependent people as well as individuals who have become dependent after being prescribed the drug by their physician. Increasingly, the number of individuals who are involved in unsupervised use of “pharmaceutical” opiates – some of which are diverted from a legitimate source – has become more prevalent. Local addictions service providers are seeing an increase in the number of individuals requesting help to address their use of opioid medications, such as codeine, morphine, hydromorphone (Dilaudid), oxycodone (Percodan), fentanyl (Duragesic), meperidine (Demerol), pentazocine (Talwin) and propoxyphene (Darvon).

Opiate addicted persons in MMT programs are able to carry on their life as productive members

Continued...





of society with improved social functioning and physical and psychological health. An evaluation of the AFM Methadone program reported positive results using information gathered from clients. It was established that within the program group there was a:

1. reduction in the harmful use of opiates (prescribed and illicit), thus improving the health of users.
2. reduction in the spread of infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B and C.
3. reduction in criminal involvement associated with opiate use.
4. improved social functioning of those accessing the program. This included employment status and the quality of personal relationships.

Methadone Maintenance Treatment (MMT)

MMT may involve all or some of the following components, depending on individual needs:

- correct dosing
- medical care for other health issues
- treatment for other substance use
- counselling and support
- mental health services
- health promotion, disease prevention and education
- linkages with community based supports and services, including housing
- outreach and advocacy

1 *Beyond the abc's* (Information for Professionals) – Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission.

2 *Evaluation of the AFM's Methadone Intervention & Needle Exchange Program* (m.i.n.e.) Jennifer Bodnarchuk, Ph.D., David Patton, Ph.D. Brian Broszeit, B.Sc. July 2005.

Methadone and Pregnancy²

A pregnant woman addicted to opioids and her fetus are at dangerous risk during withdrawal. Methadone maintenance is a standard of care for women who are addicted to opioids. Both the mother and child may experience any or all of the following benefits during Methadone replacement:

- improved prenatal care
- improved nutrition
- decreased incidence of maternal opioid withdrawal
- introduction/engagement with drug programs and other supports
- decreased criminal activity and sex trade work
- decreased IV drug use and risk of blood-borne pathogens
- decreased incidence of premature delivery
- decreased infant mortality

The majority of infants exposed to methadone in the uterus are healthy and show fewer negative outcomes than infants exposed to heroin and other illicit drugs. Women taking methadone can conceive and be safely maintained on a stable methadone dosage during pregnancy without negative long term effects on their health and that of their infants.

