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Drug abuse

Between April 2007 and March 2009 in the BEACH (Bettering the Evaluation and Care of Health) program, drug abuse was managed 770 times, at a rate of 0.4 per 100 encounters, suggesting it is managed by general practitioners about 436 000 times per year nationally. This article focuses on illicit drugs such as heroin and marijuana, and includes substances such as glue. Alcohol, tobacco and medicines are not included.

Keywords: general practice; substance related disorder



On 85% of occasions where drug abuse was managed, the general practitioners did not specify the drug involved. When details of the drug were given, heroin was most commonly specified, accounting for 8.0%, followed by marijuana, at 5.6% of drug abuse problems managed. Males accounted for 60% of contacts, confirming that drug abuse was significantly more likely in males. Patients were also more likely to be in the younger age groups, with the highest management rate (1.9 per 100 encounters) recorded for men aged 25–44 years. The highest rate for women (0.6 per 100 encounters with women aged 25–44 years) was significantly lower.

Compared with the average at all encounters in the 2008–2009 BEACH year, patients managed for drug abuse were less likely to be from a non-English speaking background, but more likely to be healthcare concession card holders (HCC), Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and/or new patients to the practice (Figure 1). Other problems most commonly managed at drug abuse encounters were depression, anxiety and schizophrenia, all of which were managed at significantly higher rates than usual.

Management of drug abuse

There were 81 medications prescribed or supplied for every 100 drug abuse problems managed. The most common were methadone and diazepam, which together made up almost half of these medications (Table 1).

Clinical treatments (mainly counselling) were provided by the GP at a significantly higher than average rate (36 per 100 drug abuse problems compared with the average of 22). Drug counselling accounted for half, and general psychological counselling a quarter of these treatments (Table 1).

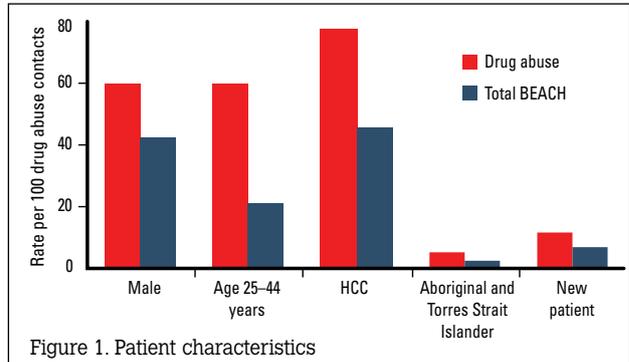


Figure 1. Patient characteristics

Table 1. Management of drug abuse

Treatment	Rate per 100 drug abuse problems managed
Medications (n=626)	81.3
– methadone	26.2
– diazepam	19.6
– buprenorphine/naloxone	6.0
Clinical treatments (n=280)	36.4
– drug counselling	18.4
– psychological counselling	9.6
Referrals – allied health (n=59)	7.7
– drug and alcohol services	4.2
– psychologist	1.7
– counsellor	0.8

The overall referral rate was close to average, but referrals to allied health services were three times higher than usual. Over half of the allied health referrals were to drug and alcohol services, while another third were to psychologists and counsellors.

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