

Reducing Drug Related Deaths - Briefing Note 3

Reducing the risks among those released from Prison

About this briefing:

This briefing is aimed at frontline staff who work with those about to be, or recently, released from prison and those serving community sentences. It aims to outline the risk of death from overdose among this client group who are particularly at risk.

Two key studies into drug related deaths following prison release have been undertaken, one for the Home Office covering England and Wales, and another undertaken with the Scottish Prison Service. A further study for the Home Office examined death rates among those serving community sentences. All three studies showed higher death rates within these groups than among the general population.

This briefing outlines the findings of these studies for practitioners, to reinforce the need for appropriate overdose awareness work with at risk individuals. Additional resources to inform and support this work are listed overleaf.

Blackpool has had high levels of Drug related Deaths over a number of years, only dropping out of the top 5 highest drug related death rate in the country, in 2003. 2005 however, has seen a rise in the proportion of deaths that have followed prison release and return to Blackpool.

Key findings

(from national studies)

- **One in ten of all deaths in the country from drugs overdose is a recently released prisoner.**
- **The determining factor in drug related deaths soon after release appears to be altered tolerance to opiates.**
- **Risk of death is highest in the first few weeks after release.**
- **In the first week after release, individuals were 40 times more likely to die than individuals in the general population, over 90% of these deaths were drug related.**
- **Ex-prisoners who died under post-custodial supervision of the Probation Service tended to do so in the first few weeks after release, ¼ in the first 4 weeks and ½ in the first 12 weeks. The largest proportion of these deaths involved drugs and/or alcohol.**
- **There is higher death rate among offenders under supervision on community sentence compared to the general population — 46% of these deaths being attributed to drugs and/or alcohol as the main or a contributory factor.**

The risk factors

- Living off crime before going to prison
- Having a small primary support group (3 people or fewer)
- Being in prison for a sex offence (main offence)
- Using drugs in the months before going into prison
- Separated, divorced or widowed
- Not using drugs in prison
- Being male aged 26 – 39

The Home Office Study

Undertaken in 1999 12,438 prisoners released in June and December were tracked until 31 January 2001. During this period 79 individuals died from drug related deaths, compared to 58 who died from other causes. The study showed that:

- **In the first week after release, individuals were 40 times more likely to die** than individuals in the general population, and over 90% of these deaths were drug related. This first week showed the highest rates of death – (55 per 1000 per annum), in the second week, this declined to 25 deaths per thousand per annum, and the third and fourth weeks to 15 deaths per annum.
- **Individuals aged 25-39 at time of release were most at risk.**
- **Over half of the recorded drug related deaths involved just one drug.** This is higher than among the wider drug using population where poly drug use contributes to over half of all Drug Related Deaths.
- **In 71% of all cases heroin/morphine were implicated** as shown as present in post mortem toxicology tests.
- Just one of the drug related deaths was adjudged, by the coroner, to be suicide. Thus **98.7% of deaths were accidental.**

The Scottish Study

A study of drug related deaths among those released from Scottish prisons (having served at least 14 days) showed that:

- 15– 35 year old male prisoners were 7 times more likely to die from drug related death in the first 2 weeks after release from 14 days+ incarceration than in any other two week period over the next 10 weeks.
- Most at risk were males aged 26—30 who had been in prison between 31-60 days

The Scottish prison population comprised of those in high risk groups including 2/3 of inmates with a history of having injected drugs and having done so in the four weeks before incarceration. Whilst half of those with a history of injecting report having done so in prison, the frequency of this injecting (6 times in 4 weeks) is much less compared to time outside of prison.

User Resources

available from the NTA at www.nta.nhs.uk (no charge)

Staying Alive After a Break, low tolerance, high risk — Credit card sized leaflet aimed at drug misusers coming out of prison. Contains information about changes in tolerance after a break from drugs, the signs of overdose and first aid

Staying Alive, Overdose, Protect and Survive — Credit card sized leaflet containing simple, short information on drug-taking, the signs of overdose, first aid and emergency action.

Overdose - everything you need to know — Envelop sized leaflet containing information about overdose myths; what to do and what not to do if you see someone overdose and how to reduce the risk of overdosing.

Lauretta— Poster which warns drug misusers of how their tolerance changes after they have had a break from drugs (Lauretta saw her friend die from a dose he could handle before he went to prison).

References

Bird, S. & S. Hutchinson (2003) *Male drugs-related deaths in the fortnight after release from prison: Scotland, 1996-99*, *Addiction*, 98, 185-190.

Sattar, G. (2001) *Deaths of offenders in prison and under community supervision*, Home Office Findings 153.

Singleton, N. et al. (2003) *Drug related mortality among newly released offenders*, Home Office Findings 187.

<http://www.hmprisonerservice.gov.uk/prisoninformation/prisonerservice magazine/index.asp?>



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