

GPs asked to do more for drug misusers

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More GPs need to get involved in providing care for drug misusers if the government's plans to overhaul and expand current drug rehabilitation services are going to succeed, the Audit Commission has said.

Although some drug treatment services are excellent, these are thin on the ground, the report says. Most services are poorly organised, offer only limited treatments, and are understaffed. Many have such long waiting lists that more than half the clients booked in never show up, and because after-treatment support is poor in many areas, clients "fall through the net" and are never heard of again.

The government has allocated an extra £167m (\$240m; €273m) over the next two years and has set up the National Treatment Agency in England to improve the quality of care and access to it. But for this additional funding to make a difference, services need to be urgently reviewed and better coordinated and staffed, says the report.

Despite often being the people to whom drug misusers turn first, many GPs are reluctant to take on the care of these patients, a survey

by the commission of more than 1500 GPs found.

Over 70% of GPs said that opiate misusers could not be managed in routine surgery and three quarters said it was inappropriate to perform dose assessment for drug substitutes in primary care. Sara Kulay, project manager of the commission's report, said it was particularly worrying that a third of GPs currently prescribing methadone were not confident about what they were doing.

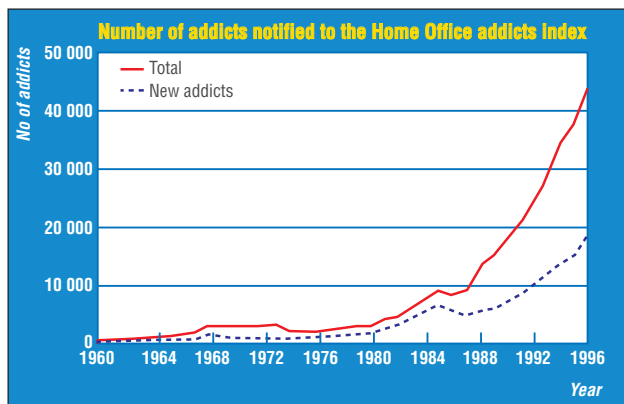
"We would like to see more GPs involved in caring for people who misuse drugs," said Ms Kulay. "The nature of drug misuse problems is that clients need rapid access to treatment," she added. "But long waiting lists mean clients are turned away when they ask for help."

According to the commission's survey of drug services in 11 areas of England and Wales, the average waiting time was 35 days in 2000, although in three areas clients were asked to wait 100 days to be treated. □

Changing Habits: The Commissioning and Management of Community Drug Treatment Services for Adults is available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

GPs' attitudes to drug misusers

Statement	Agree	Uncertain	Disagree
I have received sufficient basic training and post-qualifying training to help me manage patients with drug dependency problems	19	14	66
I feel confident in my ability to work with opiate misusers	25	23	51
Opiate misusers require forms of therapy beyond the competence of the ordinary GP	66	13	20



NHS settles claim of patients treated with LSD

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The NHS has agreed to pay a total of £195 000 (\$279 000; €319 000) in an out of court settlement to 43 former psychiatric patients who were treated with the hallucinogenic drug lysergide (LSD) between 1950 and 1970.

The patients were treated for illnesses including severe depression, schizophrenia, and postnatal depression at a few hospitals where the drug was thought at

the time to be of therapeutic value. The main centre at which this treatment took place was Powick Hospital in Worcester.

The claims, which were funded by legal aid, have been settled for a fraction of the value put on them by the claimants' lawyers. David Harris of the personal injury law firm Alexander Harris, who acted for more than 90% of the claimants, said that the two

main hurdles for claimants were the legal requirements to sue within certain time limits and the fact that the standard of care expected of doctors was lower 40 or 50 years ago than it is now.

The NHS Litigation Authority has also agreed to pay £400 000 towards the claimants' legal costs. Mr Harris said that the full costs were about £750 000 but that the firm would absorb the loss and none of his clients would have any costs subtracted from their damages to make up the shortfall.

"I know that some of the clients were very disappointed with what they got, but some have

been delighted," he said. "We will take the hit ourselves, and every client who was in the settlement will receive all the damages they have been awarded."

A spokesman for the authority said: "The legal costs of proceeding to trial in these 43 cases alone could have exceeded £3m, with a trial continuing for around six months. No admissions of liability have been made, and the settlement was motivated by a desire on behalf of this authority to limit the continuing accrual of legal costs on both sides, which have become disproportionate to the damages involved." □