

THE EXTENT OF DIVERSION OF FENTANYL FOR NON-MEDICAL PURPOSES IN AUSTRALIA: WHAT DO WE KNOW?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Background:

Fentanyl is a potent synthetically produced opioid agonist with an important role in the treatment of strong chronic pain, such as cancer pain. However, the drug does carry the risk of fatal opioid overdose if used inappropriately. In Australia, the most common forms of commercially available fentanyl include a transdermal patch, a lozenge or injection.

Small numbers of fentanyl overdose deaths have occurred from medically prescribed fentanyl patches, usually when the medication was not used as prescribed, or was used by someone other than to whom it had been prescribed. In the United States prior to 1996, reports of fentanyl abuse through the Drug Abuse Warning Network were typically low, although increases in fentanyl emergency department mentions and fentanyl-related deaths were reported by 2002 and 2003.

Clandestinely produced fentanyl, though currently generating some concern in the United States, is not a new phenomenon. Fentanyl and several potent analogues have been produced and sold as “synthetic heroin” at least as early as 1979. Deaths involving clandestinely produced fentanyl have been reported since then from the United States, Sweden, the Ukraine, Russia, and Denmark. The most recent report is a series of 272 fentanyl overdose deaths in Detroit, Chicago and New Jersey occurring over a period of a few months in the United States (Boddiger 2006). Fentanyl was either sold separately or added to street heroin or cocaine, and laboratories producing fentanyl have been discovered in both the United States and Mexico.

Triggered by this most recent report of US fentanyl fatalities, this report considers the likelihood of fentanyl misuse by Australian injecting drug users (IDU). We aim to present a summary of what is known about the extent of diversion and clandestine production of fentanyl among IDU, and any harms associated with its use in this context.