

# Reasons for seeking and ceasing opioid substitution therapy in prison and prior to release

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**Background and aims:** Clinicians providing care to opioid dependent prisoners report that some patients wish to cease opioid substitution therapy (OST) prior to release, despite advice to remain in treatment to mitigate extremely high post-release mortality risk. This study aimed to examine patient perspectives of OST in prison, particularly reasons for seeking OST, and reasons for treatment cessation prior to release.

**Methods:** We undertook qualitative interviews with 47 people in NSW correctional centres with a history of opioid use and/or dependence. Interviews focused on reasons for seeking (or not seeking) OST while in custody, and preferences with regards to remaining in treatment throughout incarceration and following release. Interview data were synthesised using NVIVO 10 to identify recurrent themes.

**Results:** Participants framed their reasons for entering OST in terms of negative outcomes avoided (e.g. avoiding withdrawal symptoms, the illicit drug trade in prison, and high-risk injecting drug use), rather than direct benefits of treatment *per se*. A third of those currently in OST intended to cease treatment prior to release. Reasons for wishing to cease treatment centred on aspects of OST that they perceived as restrictive; preference to be 'drug free'; concerns about potential for relapse through exposure to drug-using associates at OST clinics; and the stigma associated with methadone, in particular. Patients perceived clinicians' reluctance to assist with treatment withdrawal prior to release as uncaring and poor treatment planning.

**Implications:** These findings highlight the ambivalence that many opioid dependent prisoners feel towards OST. Balancing patient preferences with patient safety and good clinical practice is a major challenge for those providing care to opioid dependent prisoners. Further work is needed to determine how clinicians communicate information about post-release mortality risks and treatment options to patients, and how to address patient ambivalence towards post-release OST.

**Target audience:** Delegates from NSW government (Ministry of Health and Attorney General's Department), Justice Health & Forensic Mental Health Network, Corrective Services NSW, consumer groups and justice health advocates.