

## Heroin and other opioid related deaths on the rise

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A report released by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre reveals that a total of 500 Australians aged 15-54 died due to accidental opioid overdoses in 2008 – the latest year for which final figures are available. Based on preliminary estimates, deaths are higher again in 2009 and 2010.

Lead author of the paper Amanda Roxburgh says that while overdose deaths are significantly lower than the peaks of 1999 and 2000, when heroin was readily available, the figures show some worrying upward trends.

The largest recorded increase was among older Australians aged 45- 54, with preliminary figures indicating deaths in that age group have increased by about 50 per cent since 2008. In 1999, when deaths across the total population were highest at over 1100, older Australians accounted for less than 10 per cent of opioid deaths. In 2010, they are estimated to account for nearly one-quarter of all deaths. Older Australians are the only group where deaths have surpassed numbers recorded in 1999.

In 2008 Australians aged 25-34 still accounted for the highest proportion of opioid related deaths (39 per cent), followed by 35-44 year olds (32 per cent). But preliminary estimates for 2010 indicate that 35-44 year olds have, for the first time, overtaken the younger age groups. Deaths among adolescents and young adults, aged 15 -24, have flat-lined to around 50 a year, down from 250 a year in 1999.

Deaths in 2008 were predominantly due to opioids other than heroin (which include oxycodone and morphine), with heroin overdose only accounting for 30% of the total deaths among Australians aged 15 to 54.

Professor Michael Farrell, Director of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre said that any increase in opioid related deaths was concerning and needed to be closely monitored.

“It is certainly welcome news that deaths from heroin and other opioids are nowhere near the levels of the late nineties, when there was a well-documented expansion in the heroin market,” said Professor Farrell. “But we are now seeing rates climb up again and we need to monitor this closely.”

“Many opioid related deaths are due to multiple drug toxicity which increases the risk of fatal overdose and there needs to be continued awareness of the risks of multiple drug consumption,” he said.

“As well we need to keep a very close eye on trends among older Australians. The Australian population is ageing and they are increasingly likely to be prescribed opioids for pain. The risk of dependence needs to be well understood and promoted through health education activities. This age group is also most likely to be taking multiple prescription drugs.”

Other key findings from the 2008 figures:

- In 2008, the rate of accidental deaths in Australia due to opioids was 41.5 per million people compared with 30.4 per million in 2007
- Victoria accounted for the highest proportion of deaths (34 per cent) followed by NSW (27per cent). Victoria also accounted for the highest rates of death (56.5 per million) followed by Western Australia (51.5 per million) and South Australia. Queensland has the lowest rates of death per million followed by NSW
- Males accounted for 74 per cent of the opioid related deaths among 15 to 54 year olds

This report has been produced by the Drug Trends monitoring program at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, which is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

**Roxburgh A and Burns L (2012).** *Accidental opioid-induced deaths in Australia 2008.* National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. Sydney

<http://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/resource/accidental-opioid-induced-deaths-australia-2008>

**Media contact Marion Downey: [m.downey@unsw.edu.au](mailto:m.downey@unsw.edu.au) 02 9385 0180; 0401 713 850**