

Opioid Dependence

in General Practice

What the consulting room actually looks like

Dr Sam Maloney | GP | MPH | Alcohol & Drug Service | Correctional Primary Health | Tasmanian Aboriginal Health Service

Session includes a lived experience presentation by Maz Barbari, Peer Recovery Expert

The Scale of the Problem

Dunlop, Lokuge & Lintzeris — MJA 2021: "Too much and not enough"

>70%

of opioid overdose deaths involve
prescription opioids — not heroin

12.6M

opioid scripts dispensed
in Australia in 2024–25

329K

patients co-prescribed opioids
+ benzodiazepines in 30 days

This is not a problem at the margins of general practice. It is general practice.

How Did We Get Here?

A field in rapid evolution — and a workforce still catching up

FREI, 2010 — A TIME CAPSULE

- Sublingual buprenorphine and methadone
- Specialist referral as the safety valve
- OAT as a niche GP skill
- No LAI, no TasScript, no PBS reform
- Good advice — for a different era

THE LANDSCAPE NOW

- Buprenorphine LAI — 57% of Tas clients
- TasScript mandatory in most states
- PBS reform: OAT through community pharmacy
- 57,740 Australians on OAT — and rising
- **But fewer than 7% of GPs prescribe it**

The Consulting Room — Part 1

Don't create dependence in people with chronic pain

What the evidence tells us

Wilson et al (AJGP 2022)

GPs struggle to diagnose and treat prescription opioid use disorder. The most common response is to decline to prescribe — not to diagnose and manage.

The worthy/unworthy trap

Younger patients labelled 'abusers'. Older patients with 'genuine' pain seen as 'overusers'. Both framings cause harm.

Prevention is the first intervention

Think hard before initiating long-term opioids

Will this person's pain be better served by an opioid in 2 years?

Opioid prescribing rates peaked in 2016–17 — progress, but tapentadol is rising

329,000 patients co-prescribed opioids + benzodiazepines last year

The easiest consultation today can become the hardest in two years

The Consulting Room — Part 2

When dependence is already there — a clinical framework

CARE

Therapeutic relationship is the intervention before any medication

EXPLAIN

Most patients don't know the evidence on long-term opioids for chronic pain

ADMIT DIFFICULTY

Say it: 'I want to help and I'm worried about what these meds are doing long-term'

LIMIT

Don't escalate. Hold the dose. Resist pressure to prescribe more when it isn't working

WEAN DOWN

Slowly, collaboratively, with the patient's agreement — possible and often kinder

NO CO-PRESCRIBING

Opioids + benzodiazepines together kill people. The data are unambiguous

DAYS OFF

Even 1–2 days/week without opioids reduces tolerance and builds patient confidence

FUNCTION FOCUS

Not pain scores. Can they walk further? Sleep? Engage with family?

CONNECT

To psychology, physio, peer support, community. Opioid dependence thrives in isolation

CAUTION

Use TasScript every time. Every time.

RESPECT THE RISK

Some of these patients will die if we get this wrong. Carry that — don't let it paralyse you

Why This ECHO Program Matters

You don't have to do this alone

57,740

Australians on opioid agonist
treatment nationally

<7%

of Australian GPs currently
prescribe OAT

57%

of Tasmanian pharmacotherapy
clients receive buprenorphine LAI

The reason fewer than 7% of GPs prescribe OAT is not lack of compassion — it's lack of support.

Project ECHO is not a lecture series. It's a learning community — a hub of addiction medicine expertise available in real time, around real patients, in your actual consulting room. That's what makes it different.

Stay in the room.

The patients we're talking about are among the most vulnerable in our communities. They carry enormous stigma. They are experts in their own suffering. They need GPs who won't flinch at the complexity.

Compassionate, evidence-based care for opioid dependence belongs in every GP's toolkit — not just in specialist settings.

Expert panel: Dr Catherine Horan | Monika Petschar | Dr Nicolle Ait Khelifa

Lived experience: Maz Barbari, Peer Recovery Expert