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Why have we failed to solve the problem of opioid overdose?

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Professor Paul Dietze is the Director of the Behaviours and Health Risks Program at the Burnet Institute. With over 20 years' experience he is one of the leading researchers in the alcohol and other drug sector in Australia with an extensive history of significant and innovative research into the impact of alcohol and other drugs in the community. He has established significant work groups at Turning Point Alcohol and Drug Centre and the Burnet Institute and collaborates widely with researchers from Australia and internationally. He has played a pivotal role in work examining drug overdose and responses since the late 1990s, including the development of WHO guidelines for the community management of opioid overdose in 2014.

Abstract

Since the measurement of opioid overdose began in Australia we have been well aware of the nature and extent of fatal and non-fatal opioid overdose. We have information on the people who experience these overdoses, where they occur and the types of opioids involved. We have also developed and trialed interventions that range from individual-level interventions such as consumer education and specialist drug treatments through to environmental-level interventions such as supervised injecting facilities, all with evidence that they can reduce overdose risk. Despite all of this work, opioid overdose continues and is now reaching levels last seen in the heroin glut of the late 1990s. In this presentation I detail the ways in which our response to opioid overdose is insufficient and highlight areas for future research and intervention that will be needed in order to reduce this key drug-related harm.