

A Constructive Solution: Heroin-Assisted Treatment (HAT)

Heroin-Assisted Treatment (HAT) is a life-saving intervention for individuals struggling with addiction to illegal heroin when other treatments have not succeeded. Empirical studies demonstrate that HAT programs, as part of comprehensive treatment strategy, provide substantial benefits to long-term heroin users who have not been responsive to other treatment.

What are the Benefits?

- *HAT is effective at reducing drug use.* Studies from Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain and Canada show that HAT is associated with reductions in the use of illicit heroin, other drugs, and alcohol.
- *HAT is effective at improving health outcomes.* All studies that have examined the question have reported that HAT patients see improvements on measures of physical and mental health.
- *HAT is effective at reducing criminality.* Researchers in Spain, England, Switzerland, and Germany have reported significant reductions in arrests and crime among HAT participants.
- *HAT is cost-effective.* Higher program costs were compensated for by lower costs of auxiliary health care, law enforcement and damage to victims of crime.

How the Treatment Works

- Trials conducted abroad have operated on a strict set of guidelines to ensure safety and efficacy.
- Patients must have been addicted to illegal heroin for at least 5 to 10 years and already have undergone unsuccessful attempts with methadone or other established treatments.
- A clinic staffed by medical professionals oversees the administration of pharmaceutical-grade heroin.
- Patients are provided with sterile syringes and clean surroundings and offered psychological therapy as part of their treatment.
- Physicians help patients transition to methadone or other detoxification programs after their trial periods with HAT.

Benefits for the Patient

- Studies have shown that the patients' social interactions and behavior improve.
- Under supervision, overdoses are less likely to occur.
- They are less motivated to seek heroin on the street or engage in related illegal activities.
- They are able to manage their time, take care of their families, seek employment, and enjoy a better quality of life.

Advantages for the Community

- With reduced street crime, taxpayer-funded criminal justice costs decrease. The profits of illicit drug markets also diminish.
- Neighborhoods experience increased safety due to less open-air drug use and drug-seeking behavior.
- Patients have more time and motivation to become responsible, productive employees, contributing to thriving local workforces and economies.

The Situation in the District of Columbia:

Why our need is urgent

- The rate of HIV/AIDS in DC is a staggering 3%, with injection drug use as the cause of nearly 20% of the cases of infection.
- Over 180 people died of heroin overdose in 2005.
- Over 160 drug-related homicides occurred between 2003 and 2007, and over 9,000 people were arrested in 2007 for violating narcotic drug laws.
- In 2005, the District's budget allowed \$180,000 for criminal justice costs, but only \$26,000 for prevention, treatment, and research efforts.

Heroin-Assisted Treatment: A Track Record of International Success

Switzerland

In 1994, Switzerland became the first country to initiate HAT trials. Over 20 HAT centers currently operate throughout the country. The nation has seen a 75% overall decrease in criminal justice expenditures.

England

The next country to move forward with a trial was England. A small trial was conducted in London in 1995 and 1996. Although positive results were found and police were supportive, the project was not continued. In 2005, the Randomised Injectable Opioid Treatment Trial (RIOTT) was begun and positive results showing high retention rates, reduction in the use of street heroin, and decreases in self-reported crime were just released.

The Netherlands

Dutch researchers initiated their own trials shortly after witnessing the success of the Swiss program. Two studies were conducted between 1998 and 2001. Their results show that the participants who did not respond well to methadone (the prime candidates for HAT) accounted for a significant amount of criminal activities in their communities.

Germany

The German parliament recently approved heroin prescription to patients who were unsuccessful with methadone. A majority vote in their parliament requires that health insurance plans cover the costs of HAT. The policy measure was directly influenced by HAT studies from 2002 to 2006, which showed a clear decline in HIV/AIDS rates and the likelihood of overdose.

Spain

Spain also moved forward with a small trial in 2003 that compared injection heroin with methadone maintenance. While the study found no differences in retention rates between the experimental and control arms, it did find significantly greater improvements for drug-related risk behaviors, illicit heroin use, and health indicators in the HAT group.

Canada

The North American Opiate Medication Initiative (NAOMI) began in Vancouver in 2005 to study heroin-assisted treatment. Researchers gathered remarkable results as of October 2008. HAT and methadone maintenance treatment achieved retention rates of 88% and 54% respectively. Participants spent nearly \$1,000 less each month on drugs at the end of the treatment phase. The percentage of participants involved in illegal activities dropped from 70% to 36%. The Study to Assess Longer-term Opioid Medication Effectiveness (SALOME) will follow up on the NAOMI studies.

Denmark

In February 2008, the Danish parliament ruled nearly unanimously to implement a heroin-assisted treatment program in the country. This decision was the culmination of approximately 15 years of debate on how to treat those individuals struggling with addiction to illegal heroin. Denmark is the first country in which policymakers have moved forward with a permanent program without a trial, deeming that the evidence in other countries is conclusively positive.

The Drug Policy Alliance is the nation's leading organization working to end the war on drugs. We envision a just society in which the use and regulation of drugs are grounded in science, compassion, health, and human rights. Our mission is to advance those policies and attitudes that best reduce the harms of both drug misuse and drug prohibition and to promote the sovereignty of individuals over their minds and bodies.