

Drug Misuse

Introduction

Drug misuse is an important public health problem throughout the United Kingdom. It affects the whole spectrum of society but has a higher prevalence in communities burdened by socio-economic deprivation. Official estimates are that around 56,000 people have a drug problem involving opiates and/or benzodiazepines in Scotland¹. The UK has one of the highest rates of deaths due to drug misuse of all European countries and Scotland's drug death rate is three times that of England. Many of these excess deaths appear to be in a cohort of ageing heroin users who are especially vulnerable to death from overdose and have multiple other health issues.

Over the past 15 years new psychoactive drugs (NPS) have appeared on high streets in the UK with sellers initially managing to evade existing drug laws to supply them. Children and young people, who are frequently unaware of their potentially lethal effects, are often targeted by dealers. New legislation has curbed this trade but they are still available online and in primary care we encounter patients, and parents, with concerns about them.

In addition to the well-recognised patterns of illicit drug misuse, there is also a rapidly-growing problem with prescription drug misuse. Primary care prescribers are faced with the conundrum of managing chronic pain with potentially-addictive drugs, in patients with risk factors for drug misuse.

This module focuses on the aspects of drug misuse which are particularly challenging for practitioners trying to provide holistic primary care to their patients. Diazepam addiction is featured in the PBSGL module 'Working with Patients who live in Deprived Areas', and so is not covered in this module. Polysubstance misuse is an important area, benzodiazepines were implicated in, or potentially contributed to, 67% of drug related deaths in Scotland. The majority of these were 'street' rather than prescribed benzodiazepines².

This module covers:

- prescription opiate abuse
- gabapentinoid drug misuse
- caring for the older drug user
- new psychoactive substances (NPS)

It would be useful for PBSGL group members to compile a list of contact details for key local agencies working in substance misuse, and of helpful patient and carer resources and bring it to the meeting, as a basis for discussion and to enable sharing of this information.