

Key Issue: How effective is drug therapy for treating heroin addiction?

Describing the issue

- 1) Addiction, such as to heroin, affects the individual, not only their biology, but also their lives. Public Health England figure show that the number of opiate users in England in 2013/14 was 293,879. The number of adults *successfully* using drug therapy to become free of drug-taking was 29,150. These are high numbers and show that drug addiction and therapy for drug addiction is a key issue for society. If drug addiction is an illness, then it needs to be treated by society as such.
- 2) Someone who becomes addicted to drugs develops problems in controlling their behaviour. They cannot stop simply by themselves. Drug addiction is effectively a brain disease that the addict needs help to treat.
- 3) Drug therapy is the most common form of treatment for heroin and similar drugs. However, health providers all recognise that treatment needs to cover all aspects of someone's life – not just the effects of the drug. This is because cues in someone's life that are associated with the drug can lead to relapse.
- 4) To treat heroin addiction, a doctor will prescribe methadone or buprenorphine. The treatment is designed to help addicts avoid unpleasant withdrawal symptoms and give them time to change associations in their environment (addiction cues). The treatment also allows 'clean' drugs to be prescribed (free of disease or contamination).
- 5) Medication is often given together with psychotherapy. Psychotherapy treatments include treatment clinics, focus on motivation and behavioural therapy.
- 6) The overall issue is how effective drug therapy actually is in terms of reducing addiction.

Explaining the issue using Psychological Concepts and Ideas

- 7) There are side effects of using buprenorphine include: drowsiness, headache and sickness. There therefore needs to be a balanced decision made on whether the drug is effective enough to risk the potential side effects.
- 8) Buprenorphine can be abused as a drug – however its addictive properties can be reduced by adding chemicals such as naloxone (as done in the prescription drug Suboxone). Methadone mimics the action of heroin at the synapse more closely than buprenorphine, so it may be more effective for those with high addiction levels.
- 9) Methadone treatments may not be that effective in getting addicts drug-free. According to one UK government statistic, only 3.6% of those in treatment were discharged. There are also cost implications for the program – a 2011 estimate showed that methadone treatment cost the NHS £730 million in prescriptions. With about 150 000 people in the treatment program, this equates to about £4800 per user per year. This is the same cost as 4 weeks of residential rehabilitation – which many studies have shown to be effective in supporting addicts off drugs. These rehabilitation programs include psycho-social support which is sometimes missing from methadone only treatments.
- 10) As well as rehabilitation programs, other therapies such as group therapy have been shown to be effective in treating drug abuse. Group therapy helps users get support from one another, reduces feelings of isolation and motivates by letting them seeing the success of others in coming off drugs.