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Australians forced to pay for methadone and other drugs to get off addictive PBS medication

Aussie taxpayers are subsidising addictive pain medication but not the treatments that help get patients off the drugs, as doctors are refusing to prescribe them.



Sue Dunlevy [Follow](#)



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Australia is subsidising drugs of addiction but not the treatments that get you off them.

Health

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Exclusive: Australia is subsidising drugs of addiction but not the treatments that get you off them.

People who've become addicted to painkillers after an accident or surgery are paying up to \$200 a month in dispensing fees to access methadone and other treatments because of a perverse quirk in the nation's medicines policy.

That's up to 30 times more than they would pay for drugs of addiction under the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS).

Addictive medicines like oxycodone, endone, morphine and fentanyl cost concessional patients just \$6.80 per month and general patients \$30 to \$42.50 on the PBS.

Concessional patients can actually get these addictive drugs for free once they've spent more than \$244.80 on prescription medicines in a year.

In addition, News Corp can reveal there are hardly any doctors prescribing drug treatments like methadone and patients are waiting 12 months to get into rehab programs.



Mother of two Karly Hill who developed an addiction to painkillers after being hit by a 4WD while on her bicycle. Picture Lachie Millard

People who have been on methadone in prison are dying when they get released because they can't find a doctor to prescribe it for them.

More than 53,000 Australians are using opioid dependence treatments and many leave their addiction program because they can't afford it.

Felicity McNeil who used to head the Health Department's pharmaceutical benefits division said the majority of people become addicted to opioids through the prescribing of PBS-subsidised opioids.

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Through health reform group Better Access Australia she is campaigning for change.

"The irony is, if you stay on the drugs that cause the addiction, we will fully subsidise you. We will give you a co-payment and through a safety net we'll give you your medicines for free," she said.

"But the moment you decide to manage your health we discriminate on this."

Harm Reduction Australia's Gino Vumbaca said addiction treatments like methadone are provided free of charge by the Commonwealth.

"The issue for the cost is the dispensing. I would go to my pharmacist and get it and there'd be a daily dispensing fee of up to \$5, \$10 in some cases," he said.

"That is not covered (for addiction treatments), that doesn't get included into the (PBS) safety net. And it's a payment that has to be made to acquire the drug. So there's no cap on that."





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Charles Henderson from NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA) said if a person was on limited means "that becomes even more of a choice between food and accommodation and stability and trying to keep their medication going".

"It does mean people give up but it does mean people take maybe other options and look to illicit drug use, and that's not good," he said.

Mother of two Karly King was in a wheelchair and had to learn to walk again after a car left the road and hit her bicycle in 2018.

The Sunshine Coast masters student was put on oxycodone and morphine to control the pain from multiple fractures and became addicted.

She now has to pay \$140 a month to access opiate blocker subutex, the drug that keeps her off the drugs of addiction.

It only used to cost her \$20 a month to get oxycodone.

Ms King works for a drug and alcohol service and sees first hand the financial hardship the policy causes.





Mother of two Karly King was in a wheelchair and had to learn to walk again after a P plater hit her bicycle. She was put on oxycodone. Picture: supplied

“You’re looking at a year’s waitlist to be able to access a maintenance program and people die in that time,” she said.

“There’s a huge shortage of prescribers. I know that one doctor who had 100 patients who just retired, so that’s 100 people that no longer have a prescriber,” she said.

If you need help please contact the following services:

National 24/7 Alcohol and Other Drugs Hotline: 1800 250 015

Counselling Online counsellingonline.org.au **Family Drug Support** 1300 368 186 **Lifeline** 13 11 14 **Kids Helpline** 1800 551 800 **Beyond Blue** 1300 224 636 **MensLine** 1300 789 97

Turning Point turningpoint.org.au **Alcohol and Drug Foundation** adf.org.au **Positive Choices** positivechoices.org.au **Head to Health** headtohealth.gov.au **headspace** headspace.org.au **ReachOut** au.reachout.com

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