

Press release

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CHILDREN AT RISK FROM PARENTS' DRUG TREATMENT MEDICATIONS

New report from charity Adfam calls for coordinated national action to better safeguard children

- Medicines used to treat adults' drug addiction can be lethal to children in their care
- Charity Chief Executive: child ingestions happen with 'depressing regularity' and national lessons are not being learned from Serious Case Reviews
- New report reveals 'rare but real' use of methadone as a pacifier for small children

Adfam and Meg Munn MP lead calls for:

- Enhanced national learning from succession of child ingestion incidents
- Improved awareness and data collection on children ingesting drugs prescribed for their parents/carers
- Effective implementation of NICE guidance on protecting children when making decisions about parents' prescriptions

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Too many children are being put at risk due to insufficient safeguards to protect them from drug treatment medications prescribed to their parents and carers, according to a new report by national charity Adfam. *Medications in drug treatment: tackling the risks to children*, published today, highlights 20 Serious Case Reviews over the last decade involving the ingestion of drug treatment medications by children.

The report's findings include:

- Over 60,000 people caring for children receive prescriptions to support them through recovery from addiction
- In 2003-13 there were 20 Serious Case Reviews¹ involving the ingestion of drug treatment medications by 23 children, 17 of whom died
- Seventeen of the reviews were undertaken in the last five years
- The average age of children in the Serious Case Reviews was two
- Methadone was involved in 19 of the reviews, and was the cause of 15 deaths, mostly among children aged three and under; buprenorphine caused one death

- Safeguarding children is not sufficiently prioritised by professionals when making decisions about drug treatment medications
- Serious Case Reviews are not contributing to national learning on managing risks.

Adfam, together with MP Meg Munn, are today calling for more coordinated national action to highlight and manage the risks posed to children by Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST) medications.

Vivienne Evans OBE, Adfam’s Chief Executive, says:

“Just one of these cases would be one case too many, but this research shows that they have happened with depressing regularity over the last decade. We need a more proactive and nationally coordinated plan to tackle these risks, rather than waiting for every area in the country to experience a tragedy before anyone takes action.”

Meg Munn MP, who has previously raised this issue in Parliament, says:

"This important report shows that not enough is being done to protect children from methadone being taken by adults. If more children are not to die then the Government must ensure significant improvement in the practice and procedures of organisations working with drug users.

Whilst we have a clear view of the risks involved with these medications, it’s unacceptable that we don’t know how many children might be affected: we need to know more about take-home prescriptions and how many children are exposed to them.

These tragedies are not always unavoidable. Parents and all the professionals working with them have a responsibility to manage the dangers posed by powerful prescription drugs being stored in the home, and we need them all to take a more active role in minimising risk.”

Some children had ingested methadone after it was stored insecurely in the home or in inappropriate containers, and several children died after parents gave them methadone in deliberate but misguided attempts to pacify them. Not all cases of ingestion reach Serious Case Review level, so the true extent of the risk is not known.

Many Serious Case Reviews reach similar conclusions relating to safe storage advice, restricting take-home medication for parents and improving professional awareness. The report questions whether each case has contributed to national learning, and highlights the absence of a proactive approach to managing the risks.

The report’s calls to action include:

- Better national data collection on the number of parents allowed to take home OST medicines, and the number of children admitted to hospital after ingesting them
- Improved national analysis of Serious Case Reviews involving drug ingestions by children
- Representation for drug treatment agencies on Local Safeguarding Children Boards
- Reemphasis of the importance of safeguarding children when making decisions about OST, according to existing guidance from the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE)
- Improved training for drug services, pharmacies, GPs and social workers to highlight the dangers of drug treatment medications and to help professionals address the deliberate administration of drugs to children
- Lockable storage boxes and agreed safety plans for anyone with childcare responsibilities who takes OST medication home.

Evidence shows that Opioid Substitution Treatment² (OST) is effective in treating drug addiction, and it is an important part of the Government's Drug Strategy. Guidelines from the Department of Health and the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) also state that risks to children should be assessed by professionals deciding which drugs to prescribe and whether they can be taken home by the patient. However, the new report suggests that the risks to children are not being adequately managed in practice.

Vivienne Evans continues:

"We've already seen these cases happen from Bradford to Bridgend, and many towns and cities elsewhere. The cases are frequent and similar enough that we should be much louder and more honest about the risks of methadone to children, including the rare but real instances of parents using it to try and soothe babies and toddlers.

Medications and recovery aren't mutually exclusive and we're very supportive of substitution treatment. However, safeguarding should be first and foremost in professionals' minds when working with parents who use drugs and alcohol, and the report suggests this isn't always the case."

Meg Munn MP adds:

"People need to be more aware of the dangers that methadone can pose to children when it's stored or used incorrectly. This new research will play a valuable role in raising awareness of these cases, and pushing for a more effective approach to prevention."

A spokesperson for CRI, a national drug treatment provider, welcomed publication of the report:

"CRI welcomes this review of the potential risks of prescribing Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST) medicines to recovering drug users with children. Whilst OST is an integral part of the recovery process for many people, these are powerful drugs that can be fatal if taken outside of prescribing guidelines. That's why it's essential that we have robust prescribing processes in place, and that we educate OST users on the dangers to children of not properly storing these medicines.

"The report also highlights some rare, but worrying instances of parents actively giving children OST drugs as a way of soothing or calming them when they're upset. These parents may not be aware just how potent and dangerous these drugs are to children, so it's important professionals educate all OST-prescribed parents on the affect these drugs have on children, as well as creating an environment in which service users are encouraged to seek help about these kinds of practices."

ENDS

Notes for editors

The executive summary and full report are available from www.adfam.org.uk.

Vivienne Evans OBE and Meg Munn MP are available for interview to discuss the report's findings

Previous media coverage of some of the cases covered in the research is available online:

- BBC News (13 Dec 2013) [‘Riley Pettipierre methadone death preventable, report finds’](#)
- BBC News (23 Feb 2010) [‘Caenarfon family’s shock after baby given methadone’](#)
- BBC News (9 Mar 2011) [‘Ryan Thomas-Weager ‘overdosed on father’s methadone’](#)

About Adfam

Adfam is a national charity supporting families affected by drug and alcohol use.

About the report

The report examines Serious Case Reviews from England and Wales, international research and media coverage, and presents findings from interviews with a variety of experts and frontline professionals working with parents who use drugs.

The report was funded by an educational grant from Reckitt Benckiser Pharmaceuticals.

References

¹Serious Case Reviews are undertaken when a child dies or is seriously harmed, and abuse or neglect are suspected to be factors. They are the responsibility of Local Safeguarding Children Boards.

²Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST) is a medical procedure whereby prescription drugs (usually methadone or buprenorphine) are used to support people trying to reduce or stop their use of opioids such as heroin. The process aims to manage withdrawal and reduce dependence over time so people can overcome their addiction and pursue other life goals. Research on the place of this practice in treatment can be found in NTA (2012) [Medications in recovery: re-orientating drug dependence treatment](#) (pdf).