

MEDIA RELEASE

9th February 2021



Federal Health Minister must immediately remove the discriminatory and unlawful payments plaguing the opioid treatment system.

Following [multiple media reports](#) in [BioPharmaDispatch](#) and responses from the Minister and Department of Health, HRA Spokesperson Annie Madden AO says the [potentially unlawful and unenforceable private fees](#) being charged to patients accessing the Opiate Dependence Treatment (ODT) Program in community pharmacy must be replaced immediately with access to the PBS co-payment and safety net system.

“HRA has long argued that these private dispensing fees, that can amount to \$50-\$200 per month, are unfair and a significant barrier to accessing treatment. To learn that the Government’s on-going denial of access to the normal operations of the PBS co-payment and safety net system is likely to be unlawful demands immediate action. Community pharmacists and other dispensers have been put in the position of knowing that every private fee they charge someone accessing the ODT Program and every denial of their access to the PBS co-payment and safety net system is likely to be legally invalid as the removal of these patient rights and protections has not been ratified by the Australian Parliament.”

“This is unacceptable for pharmacies and other dispensers of ODT Program medicines. It is incredibly unjust for the tens of thousands of patients walking into a pharmacy or clinic today to continue to be denied the same access to PBS listed medicines as everyone else.”

“The community would not accept a cancer patient or diabetic being asked to hand over at least \$50 a week to access their PBS-funded medicines. They would be even more concerned to learn patients were being charged the fee without any legally enforceable right from Parliament to do so.”

The PBS is about improving health outcomes through affordable access to medicines recommended by the PBAC. It is not about discriminating and stigmatising some of the most vulnerable and marginalised in our community by knowingly making their healthcare unaffordable.

In October 2019, [Minister Hunt recognised that](#) *“Every day in Australia three people die from drug-induced deaths involving opioid use, and nearly 150 hospitalisations and 14 emergency department admissions involve opioid harm.”*

He further noted that *“Over 110,000 Australians are currently struggling with opioid dependence with increasing deaths from overdose, 1119 deaths in 2016, [with] [p]rescription opioids...”*

As a result of this situation, Minister Hunt took the welcome step of listing take-home naloxone to try and prevent these tragic deaths.

Today, given the unlawful status of the current ODT Program co-payment rules and the inherent discrimination, HRA is calling on Minister Greg Hunt to:

- 1. Place an immediate moratorium on the collection of any dispensing fees from people accessing the ODT Program.**
- 2. Allow immediate access for those on the ODT Program to the PBS co-payment and safety net systems in the same manner as they treat every other person needing access to PBS-funded medicines.**
- 3. Seek a permanent solution to this untenable situation by hosting urgent discussions with all stakeholders, including consumer representatives, to fix this long-standing barrier to people being able to access or afford opioid dependency treatment.**

Contact: Annie Madden AO of Harm Reduction Australia on 0414-628-136

Harm Reduction Australia is a national organisation for individuals committed to reducing the health, social and economic harms potentially associated with drug use. HRA takes a non-judgmental approach to drug use within society and recognises the key role people with current and past drug use experience must play in any effective drug policy solutions. As well as working collaboratively to ensure reform to current drug policy with the primary aims of ending imprisonment, stigmatisation, discrimination and human rights violations against the people who use or have used drugs.

We are dedicated to reducing the harmful impact of drug use in Australia through evidence-based, sensible and safer drug policies.
