



## Media release

### Young women using heroin require most episodes of hospital care

Young heroin users are relatively high users of acute hospital care services, both for conditions related to their drug use as well as conditions experienced in the wider community, and women use the services more than men even though there are fewer of them, a study of over 200 heroin users has found.

The medical conditions include infectious diseases, endocrine disorders, and diseases of the nervous, circulatory, respiratory, digestive, musculoskeletal and genitourinary systems.

The 10-year study, conducted by emergency medicine specialist Professor Daniel Fatovich and colleagues from the University of Western Australia, Royal Perth Hospital, Curtin University of Technology, the Department of Health, and the Western Australian Institute for Medical Research, is published in the latest issue of *Emergency Medicine Australasia*, the journal of the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine.

Until now, research into illness experienced by heroin users has focused on problems related to drug use, such as blood-borne viruses and vascular injury due to injecting practices.

However, heroin users are part of the general community, and as such, are exposed to general health problems.

The researchers found that there are a cluster of hospitalizations around the time of a heroin overdose, and this is likely to be related to heroin availability.

Three-quarters of all hospitalizations were for injury and poisoning, mental disorders, and the complications of pregnancy.

Although there were more male heroin users in this study, the number of hospitalizations of women was twice that of men, possibly related to complications of pregnancy, most commonly abortion.

The researchers also found younger age groups were more often hospitalized than those older.

“Younger patients are likely to be less experienced with the use of heroin, thus resulting in greater complications requiring use of health services,” the researchers said.

“They may also be more chaotic polydrug users, with higher rates of suicidal ideation, who are more indifferent to their own safety than older users.

“This suggests that any intervention program should focus on those under the age of about 30 years.”

#### FURTHER INFORMATION:

Professor Daniel Fatovich

Phone 0409 103 818

Issued for the Australasian College for Emergency Medicine (03 9320 0444) by Marilyn Bitomsky, phone 07 3371 3057 or 0412 884 114