**“I’m Not a Junkie” – Are People Who Misuse OTC Codeine Different Than Those That Abuse Other Opioids?**

K LAW1, R BRUNO2, B MCAVOY1,4
1 Alcohol & Drug Service, New Town, Tasmania, 2 University of Tasmania, Sandy Bay, Tasmania, 3 NDARC, University of NSW, 4 Universities of Auckland, Melbourne, Monash and Queensland

**Introduction:**
- In Australian some codeine preparations are available without a prescription, over-the-counter (OTC) at pharmacies. This allows supply for legitimate pain without a doctor’s consultation whilst enabling illicit use in quantities exceeding those recommended
- OTC codeine misuse is a substantial problem
- Excessive OTC codeine use results in significant morbidity and mortality
- Many people that have developed problems associated with OTC codeine report discomfort attending services for other opioid consumers.
- Many consumers consider OTC codeine as a ‘respectable person’s drug’ and this juxtaposition of substance use disorder and notions of ‘respectability’ poses unique challenges for clinical responses

**Key Results:**
- Both the OTC and the strong opioid (SO) cohorts had equal numbers (n=15)
- The codeine group had: (compared with the strong opioid group):
  - Significantly shorter delay to initiation into treatment (4.24 years OTC vs 10.36 years SO, p= 0.01)
  - More likely to have a medical condition related to their misuse (33% OTC vs 0% SO, p= 0.05)
  - Less likely to have intravenous drug use on admission (33% OTC vs 87% SO, p= 0.009)
  - Less likely to have lifetime history of amphetamine use (47% OTC vs 87% SO, p= 0.05)

**Meaningful trends for the OTC Codeine group compared to the Strong Opioid group:**
- Greater percentage of females (73% OTC vs 33% SO, p= 0.067)
- Lower percentage of unemployment (33% OTC vs 73% SO, p= 0.067)
- Lower percentage of previous history of ORT (27% OTC vs 67% SO, p= 0.067)
- Greater exposure to counselling (67% OTC vs 27% SO, p= 0.067)

**Discussions and Conclusions:**
- Most clients in both groups suffered from some type of psychiatric comorbidity, with depression and anxiety being the two most common afflictions in both groups.
- For the OTC codeine group:
  - Average number of tablets consumed per day (depending on the amount of codeine in each formulation) was 48.6 (SD= 20.3, range= 20 – 100 tablets/day).
  - Average dose of codeine was 653mg/day (SD= 1280mg/day).
- One patient reported consuming up to 100 Panafen Plus® tablets a day

**Implications for Practice, Policy and Legislation:**
- Legislative review of Schedule 3 (S3) status and availability of OTC codeine analgesics continues
- OTC codeine products are being monitored by MedsASSIST (a pharmacy based real-time Australia-wide OTC codeine recording program)
- The MedsASSIST program needs to be evaluated independently to determine if it is effective in preventing misuse
- OTC codeine’s ready availability with minimal monitoring has the potential to put patients at risk of development of dependence
- Novel approaches and treatment pathways may need to be considered for these clients misusing OTC codeine, examples could include:
  - Treatment within local areas
  - Remote consultations (e.g. Facetime, Skype)
  - Face-to-face consultations outside of work hours
  - Privacy at dosing points
  - In the future the use of depot buprenorphine to enable resumption of normal life

**For low dose codeine to remain available without a prescription then the difficulties of balancing the ease of S3 access against the risk of misuse must be resolved otherwise up-scheduling to prescription only (S4) will be the only option to maintain public safety.**