



UNDER EMBARGO—until 1:00AM, TUESDAY, 19 DECEMBER, 2017

More Australians using pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes, with drug induced deaths more likely to be a result of pharmaceuticals than illegal drugs

The number of Australians who misuse pharmaceuticals is rising, with the number of deaths caused by these drugs responsible for more deaths than illegal drugs, according to a report released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).

The report, *Non-medical use of pharmaceuticals: trends, harms and treatment: 2006–07 to 2015–16*, looks at two main types of prescription drugs: opioid analgesics (which are prescribed to treat pain and addiction to heroin and other opioids, and include morphine, codeine and tramadol), and benzodiazepines (prescribed to improve sleep and treat stress).

‘Over the past decade, there has been a substantial rise in the number of deaths involving a prescription drug, with drug-induced deaths more likely to be due to prescription drugs than illegal drugs,’ said AIHW spokesperson Matthew James.

‘In 2016 there were 1,808 drug-induced deaths in Australia with benzodiazepines the most common single drug type, identified in 663 drug-induced deaths. This is followed by 550 deaths from other opioids (including prescription painkillers such as oxycodone, morphine, and codeine).

The report shows that in 2016 about 1 million Australians (4.8% of the total population) aged 14 years or older had misused a pharmaceutical drug in the past 12 months up from 3.7% in 2007. In 2016, the non-medical use of pharmaceuticals was higher than all illegal drugs, except cannabis (10.4%).

Internationally, the non-medical use of pharmaceuticals and resulting harms are also rising, including in the United States of America (USA) and Canada. The rate of dispensed prescriptions for opioids has risen by 24% —from 36,900 per 100,000 population in 2010–11 to 45,600 per 100,000 population in 2014–15, while prescriptions for benzodiazepines has remained fairly stable.

Earlier this year, the AIHW’s [2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey](#) showed that Indigenous Australians were more than twice as likely to have recently used a pharmaceutical for non-medical purposes than non-Indigenous Australians.

The Survey also found people living in *Remote/Very remote* areas were almost twice as likely as those living in *Major cities* to have recently used a pharmaceutical for non-medical purposes.

‘This finding also held true for Australians living in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic areas, with 6% having recently misused pharmaceuticals compared with 4.2% of those in the most advantaged areas,’ said Mr James

Recent users of pharmaceuticals for non-medical purposes were also more likely than those who had not misused pharmaceuticals to experience mental illness (29% compared with 15.2%), chronic pain (15.9% compared with 10.3%), and high or very high levels of psychological distress (24.1% compared with 10.9%).

More people are seeking treatment for opioid analgesics, an increase from 56% in 2006–07 to 73% in 2015–16.

Canberra, 18 December