

MEDIA RELEASE

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Victoria: 526 fatal overdoses in 2020

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) is highly distressed at the excessive number of fatal overdoses that occurred during 2020, a year coupled with COVID-19 restrictions.

The Coroners Court of Victoria have released data on fatal overdoses in Victoria from 2011 – 2020 revealing that 4551 Victorians fatally overdosed in the past decade..

It is evident from the data that COVID-19 and the associated restrictions had some impact on the types of substances which contributed to fatal overdose but, overall, the number of deaths is devastating with 526 Victorians losing their lives to fatal overdose in 2020.

There are a number of notable trends within the data, including:

- Benzodiazepines contributed to 281, being more than half, of all fatal overdoses¹; benzodiazepines are generally captured by the government's real time prescription monitoring program, *Safescript*;

Mr Sam Biondo, executive officer of VAADA says, 'pharmaceuticals continue to make the biggest contribution to fatal overdose, contributing to 75.7% of all fatal overdoses in 2020². While this is a small decrease on previous years, the pharmaceutical toll is too high. The impact of *safescript* remains largely unknown, with an absence of data on outcomes among those flagged by the program. We know that in the first six months of 2020, approximately 70,000 cases were flagged by the system; beyond this, we don't know what happened to these people, what support, if any was provided. We have heard from various agencies that in some cases, general practitioners have ceased prescribing to these people and provided no additional support.'

- Alcohol has contributed to 154 fatal overdoses, which is the second highest on record since the Coroners Court has been releasing this data.

Mr Biondo, continues, 'we know that the way people consumed alcohol changed dramatically under COVID-19, with an increase in drinking occurring in the home, often in isolation. It is not surprising that alcohol has made such a strong contribution to overdose in 2020, nor is it surprising that 2020 marked the highest rate of alcohol solely contributing to fatal overdose'.

¹ P. 12

² P. 9, table 5

- Heroin contributed to 187 fatal overdoses, a drop from the 2019 figure of 212, returning to the 2016 rate³.

Mr Biondo continues, 'while heroin contributes to far too many deaths, the reduction in fatalities is welcomed. However, a large contributor to this reduction is likely to contraction of the heroin market evident in the latter part of 2020. The data show significant promise for the North Richmond medically supervised injecting room, with Yarra recording nine heroin related fatal overdoses, down from 17 in 2019⁴.'

- MDMA, cocaine and GHB contributions to fatal overdose have all increased during 2020⁵, with GHB doubling from seven to 18 overdoses.

Mr. Biondo says, 'these increases are not surprising and align with a range of data sources as well as feedback from the treatment sector. In some cases these substances may have been more greatly accessed due to COVID-19 related shortages in substances such as methamphetamine and heroin and limitations in domestic and international trafficking. These substances come with their own challenges and complexities.'

- There has been an increase in the contribution of novel psychoactive substances (NPS), increasing from 2 fatal overdoses in 2017 to 33⁶ in 2020.

The Coroners Court notes that NPS are designed to mimic the effects of more classic substances, such as MDMA and cannabis. They are often more harmful than the 'classic' substance, with the consumer often under the assumption that they are taking something less harmful.

Mr Biondo continues, 'the Coroners Court has responded to this surge of NPS related fatal overdose, recommending the implementation of a drug checking service and public alert system. This would allow people to have their substances tested and in cases where a highly harmful NPS is evident, allow for an alert to be issued to warn people about the substance. These pragmatic reforms have been implemented in a range of other countries. Victoria should prioritise these reforms, rather than waiting for the death toll to escalate.'

'Of note, throughout 2020, agencies were alerting us to the increasing presence of analogue / NPS benzodiazepines, which have been the major contributor the dramatic increase in NSP related fatal overdose. It remains too early to tell whether the increased prevalence of these substances are COVID-19 related or part of an alarming new trend.'

- 2020 has ushered in a number of shifts in overdose rates among certain age groups and gender⁷.

Mr Biondo says, '2020 has seen some majors changes in the overdose rates among certain cohorts; for instance, 2020 saw the highest number of males aged 18-24 years fatally overdosing (27, up from 15 in 2019). There was also a marked decrease in the number of women aged 55 and over fatally overdosing from 64 to 46 in 2020, with smaller reductions among males of that age bracket. During 2020, the Coroners Court recorded the highest number of women aged 25 – 44 years fatally overdosing, with 89 fatal overdoses in 2020, up from 60 in 2019.'

³ P. 12

⁴ P. 17

⁵ P. 12

⁶ Pp. 15-16

⁷ P. 6

'These data reveal a dramatic shift from pre-existing trends which can likely attributed to aspects of COVID-19, including how we use drugs, the types of substances available and the social and economic impact of the restrictions on certain demographics.'

Mr Biondo continues, 'this data reveals a number of dramatic changes on pre existing trends, the ascension of new substances as changes in the rate of fatal overdose among certain cohorts. The degree of impact from COVID-19 remains to be seen.

'The overall focus must be on reducing this toll. Since 2011, 4551 people have fatally overdosed in Victoria. This eclipses the road toll. This data has revealed that current harm reduction initiatives, such as the MSIR, have shown some promise, with Yarra experiencing a 50% reduction in heroin overdoses in the year leading to 2020. These and other pragmatic initiatives, coupled with a targeted approach to high risk cohorts, such as recently released prisoners, are required to reduce this toll. Currently, at best, we are treading water.

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VAADA is the peak body that represents over 80 Alcohol and other Drug services across Victoria. On a daily basis these services are dealing with the effects of harmful alcohol and other drug consumption.

For more information or to arrange an interview please contact Sam Biondo 0414 974 121 for comment or if unavailable, David Taylor on 0413 914 206.