

MEDIA RELEASE

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Coronial death toll drops but so much more to be done

2021 fatal overdose data released

The Coroners Court of Victoria today released the 2021 fatal overdose data which shows a reduction in fatal overdose from 536 (2020) to 500 (2021). The release of this data is timely with International Overdose Awareness Day later this week.

While this reduction is welcome, there are a number of concerning trends evident within the data, including:

- The highest number of men fatally overdosing (353) over the past decade
- The highest number of fatal overdoses in metropolitan Melbourne (399) over the past decade
- The highest number of fatal overdoses with methamphetamine contributing (137) over the past decade
 - Illicit substance related overdose has more than doubled over the past decade (126 to 260)
- The highest number of novel psychoactive substances (NPS) contributing (35) over the past decade
- The highest number of fatal overdoses with alcohol as the sole contributing substance (53) over the past decade
 - Alcohol related fatal overdose has almost doubled over the past decade (80 to 147)

There has also been some consistency in the data:

- Pharmaceuticals continue to contribute to approximately three in four fatal overdoses (75.2%)
- Three in four overdoses involved more than one substance (73.6%)
- Benzodiazepines contribute to more than 50% of all fatal overdoses (53.2%)

There have been some mild improvements, including:

- The lowest number of women fatally overdosing since 2014 (147)
- The lowest number of fatal overdoses in rural and regional Victoria since 2014 (101)
- A reduction in the number of fatal overdoses across all drug classes over the past year
- Heroin contributions to fatal overdose have halved in regional Victoria over the past two years (40 to 22)

Mr Sam Biondo, Executive Officer of the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA), says, 'International Overdose Awareness Day brings home the human cost of these figures. That there are real people and families behind each of these figures. Although we are pleased that there is a modest reduction, the rate of overdose is far too high, especially while there are some straight forward innovations we could implement that would make deep inroads in reducing this toll. This data provides further insight into what needs to be done to reduce this dreadful toll'.

Mr Biondo continues, 'this data is less straightforward than previous years. The reduction in overall fatal overdoses conceals an increase among men and people living in Melbourne. While this increase is in line with the incremental increases of previous years, it is difficult to pin point the drivers for the dramatic decrease in fatal overdose among women and in regional Victoria. Greater examination is required to ascertain if this amounts to a significant decline in fatal overdose among women living in rural and regional Victoria.'

The Coroner's report highlights that between 2020 and 2021, regional fatal overdoses declined from 140 to 101 and fatal overdose among women declined from 187 to 147.

'It is hard to know what impact the pandemic may have had; there have been evolving drug use trends throughout the pandemic, with an increase in varying patterns of drug use between different regions. International drug markets were impacted but equally the local market adapted in unpredictable and harmful ways. It is possible that the restrictions may have impacted access to certain substances yet created opportunities for new substances in regional Victoria.'

The Coroners report reveals that, despite a small decrease in alcohol related fatal overdose, there is the continuation of a disturbing trend on alcohol, with 2021 having the highest number of fatal overdose involving alcohol as the sole contributing substance.

'In 2021, 53 of the 147 alcohol related fatal overdoses had no other contributing substances; this is up from 26 of the 152 alcohol related fatal overdoses in 2017. As we know, the pandemic and isolation changed our relationship with alcohol, with many people drinking more, in isolation for a longer period. Alcohol and other drug (AOD) treatment agencies saw an increase in alcohol related presentations, both in prevalence and severity. Our concern is that this surge of alcohol only fatal overdoses is indicative of a broader trend of pandemic driven risky drinking.'

'Alcohol continues to be represented as a coping mechanism to the pandemic with surging profits to the liquor industry and increasing alcohol related harm to the community.'

The increase in methamphetamine contributions to fatal overdose is particularly concerning. The increase in fatal overdose over the past year has occurred entirely in Melbourne with methamphetamine contributing to 21 fatal overdoses in Victoria for the second year in a row.

'It is evident that some of the measures implemented by the government are reducing the fatal overdose toll. Heroin related fatal overdoses in Yarra have reduced from 26 in 2018 to 11 in 2021. While greater examination of the data is required to establish causality, at face value we believe this is a positive indication of the effectiveness of the injecting room.'

'The overall portion of contributions to fatal overdose by pharmaceuticals has declined slightly since Safescript was introduced but it is hard to establish causality in the absence of an evaluation of patient outcomes from those flagged by the system. Furthermore, this reduction could be related to the rescheduling of alprazolam and codeine.'

'The high NPS contributions to fatal overdose is cause for concern, especially as there is clear evidence on means to reduce this toll. The Coroners Court has on a number of occasions recommend Victoria implement a drug checking facility and public alert system. This would allow people to test their drugs and ascertain if they contain any hazardous substances, such as fentanyl. A public alert system would inform people of the hazardous substance by appearance. Other jurisdictions that have implemented these innovations have seen a reduction in fatal overdose as people discard identified hazardous substances.'

Reducing this toll requires a range of actions, including:

1. Additional AOD treatment capacity; daily waitlists for AOD treatment increased by 71% over the pandemic. VAADA is concerned that people are dying on waitlists.

2. Increased resourcing and prioritisation of harm reduction endeavours including
 - a. Medically supervised injecting
 - b. Drug checking and public alert systems
3. Increased capacity for Victoria's opioid replacement therapy, particularly in regional areas where there are gaps in service access, as well as:
 - a. Subsidization of the dispensing fee;
 - b. Trial hydromorphone across four regions of Melbourne
4. Following the trend of other jurisdictions of drug law reform, to decriminalize currently illicit substances. The justice system exacerbates substance related harm, through stigma. Additionally, people exiting the prison system experience high rates of preventable fatal overdose
5. Addressing stigma and discrimination toward people who use drugs; this includes systemic discrimination which impacts upon peoples access to support services as well as the broader social customs and narratives that promote stigmatizing language and practices towards people who use drugs
6. Capturing and reviewing outcomes related to Victoria's real time prescription monitoring program, Safescript, to ensure that suitable referrals and outcomes are occurring for people flagged by the program as being at risk of pharmaceutical related harm

To access VAADA's election statement and companion summary, see:

Summary: https://www.vaada.org.au/?smd_process_download=1&download_id=30375

Full Statement: https://www.vaada.org.au/?smd_process_download=1&download_id=30372

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Media stories on alcohol and other drugs may be traumatic for some people. Support is available and we ask that media agencies consider publishing the details below:

If this story has raised issues about your own or others drug and alcohol use, please contact the national hotline for confidential counselling and referral on 1800 250 015

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, EO of VAADA, on 0414 974 121 for comment or if unavailable, David Taylor on 0413 914 206.