

Economic Benefit from Lifelong Methadone Treatment

An important study conducted by researchers at Research Triangle Institute (RTI) International estimates that methadone treatment for heroin users generates seven times more economic benefits than previously thought.

The study, which appeared in the November 2005 issue of *Health Economics*, is the first to present lifetime estimates of the costs and benefits associated with drug use and its treatment. The research was funded by grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse. While previous studies have examined the benefits and costs of drug treatment, they have typically focused on a single treatment episode, implicitly treating drug abuse as an acute problem that can be cured in one episode.

When viewed as a chronic condition, research on heroin users shows that the benefits of treatment and the societal savings are even more significant. “Drug abuse is a chronic, recurring condition that leads many drug users to enter treatment throughout their lifetime,” said Gary Zarkin, Ph.D., RTI’s principal investigator for the study. “Our goal was to develop a lifetime simulation model that represents a realistic view of the recurring episodes of drug use and treatment so that we could obtain a more accurate picture of the social and economic consequences of heroin use.”

To reach that goal, the RTI research team which included Zarkin, Laura Dunlap and Katherine Hicks, designed an innovative simulation model to represent the progression of individuals from 18 to 60 years of age with respect to their heroin use, treatment for heroin use, criminal behavior, employment and health care use.

Results of the study showed that increasing heroin users’ access to treatment significantly increases societal benefits and costs. By receiving effective treatment, people’s propensity to use drugs is changed, which in turn increases their employment opportunities and lessens their likelihood to commit future crimes and seek health care. The research suggests that treatment for heroin users yields \$38 in economic benefits for each dollar spent on treatment, which is seven times greater than previous studies.

“Lifetime models give a much more accurate picture of both the costs and benefits of treating chronic conditions,” Zarkin said. “Our results further strengthen the case for the value of drug abuse treatment.”

Reference

Zarkin G. A., Dunlap L. J., Hicks K. A., and Mamo D. (2005) Benefits and costs of methadone treatment: results from a lifetime simulation model. *Health Economics*, 14(11): 1133-1150.