

Why don't out-of-treatment individuals enter methadone treatment programs?

Abstract

Background: Despite the proven effectiveness of methadone treatment, the majority of heroin-dependent individuals are out-of-treatment.

Methods: Twenty-six opioid dependent adults who met the criteria for methadone maintenance but were not seeking methadone treatment at the time of study enrollment, nor had it during the past 12 months, were recruited from the streets of Baltimore, Maryland through targeted sampling. Ethnographic interviews were conducted to ascertain participants' attitudes toward methadone treatment and their reasons for not seeking treatment.

Results: Barriers to treatment entry included: waiting lists, lack of money or health insurance, and requirements to possess a photo identification card. For some participants, beliefs about methadone such as real or rumored side effects, fear of withdrawal from methadone during an incarceration, or disinterest in adhering to the structure of treatment programs kept them from applying. In addition, other participants were not willing to commit to indefinite "maintenance" but would have accepted shorter time-limited methadone treatment.

Conclusion: Barriers to treatment entry could be overcome by an infusion of public financial support to expand treatment access, which would reduce or eliminate waiting lists, waive fees and/or provide health insurance coverage for treatment. Treatment programs could overcome some of the barriers by waiving their photo I.D. requirements, permitting time-limited treatment with the option to extend such treatment upon request, and working with corrections agencies to ensure continued methadone treatment upon incarceration.

Keywords: *heroin addicts, methadone treatment, out-of-treatment*