Psychosocial impacts of Opioid Replacement Therapy (ORT) among consumers in regional Victoria

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Design and Methods
Using interpretive methodology the researchers undertook in-depth semi-structured interviews with 16 participants in five different regional centres in Victoria. An expert advisory group of consumers and service providers gave guidance to the project.

Introduction and Aims
In Western Victoria, the Orticare Network identified the need for authentic consumer feedback to inform how health professionals deliver opioid-replacement therapy (ORT) services. This partnership project between Ballarat Community Health (Orticare lead agency) and Federation University was formed to undertake the research as existing research concentrates solely on metropolitan settings. The aims of the study were to:
1. Explore ORT from the perspective of consumers in rural communities
2. Generate knowledge about consumers’ experience of participating in a rural ORT program
3. Develop consumer focused best practice

Findings
Participants identified how the treatment regime impacted their lived experiences, for example:
• the number of visits to the pharmacy and feeling stigmatised
• the lack of coordination and communication between health practitioners
• access to daily takeaways
• constraints on ability to work, meet family and other social commitments
• imposed financial burdens and
• other psychosocial impacts such as depression, anxiety and the risks of misuse and diversion.

Participants referred to childhood abuse, family violence with a long history of drug and alcohol use. Distance travelled to dispensing pharmacies and the lack of public transport added an additional time and cost burden. These issues plus the potential lack of privacy and confidentiality at the local pharmacy, were characteristics of the rural and regional environments.

Recommendations
- Improve community attitudes and reduce stigma
- Changes to service provision to provide client focused support for example case management
- Reduce cost burden
- Improve access to prescribers
- Improve social support and counselling

“I came to the country because Mum is here and some of my family. If I didn’t have them I would probably be dead like so many of my friends...Coming here has saved my life. If you don’t have the connection you may as well be dead”...Dave