

CHILDREN AT RISK

Adfam, the national charity for families affected by drugs and alcohol, have published a new report that shines a light on one of the murkier corners of addiction treatment. *Medications in drug treatment: tackling the risks to children* addresses the dangers presented to children when they ingest medications meant to help treat their parents' addiction.

The report discusses the findings of the twenty relevant Serious Case Reviews (SCR) in England and Wales from the 10 years following the 2003 publication of the *Hidden Harm* report, before highlighting the issues raised by 11 interviews, two focus groups and a roundtable discussion group they conducted.

The report finds that over 60,000 people in the UK who care for children are prescribed substitute medications, mostly methadone and buprenorphine. Between 2003 and 2013, twenty SCR were conducted after incidents were reported; 19 involved methadone, which led to the deaths of 15 very young children. Buprenorphine also caused the death of a child in this period, and 17 deaths were reported in total; the children who were involved in serious cases were on average only two years old. While it was often not known how the children came to ingest their parents' medicines, in at least five cases they were deliberately administered by their parents in attempts to soothe or pacify them.

Adfam strongly emphasise that their report must not be read as an attack on the use of methadone or other opiate substitute treatment drugs and make it clear that problems are very much the exception and not the rule. Nonetheless the problem is real, as Vivienne Evans, Adfam Chief Executive, notes: "Just one of these cases would be one case too many, but this research shows that they have happened with depressing regularity over the last decade... We've already seen these cases happen from Bradford to Bridgend, and many towns and cities elsewhere. The cases are frequent and similar enough that we should be much louder and more honest about the risks of methadone to children,



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including the rare but real instances of parents using it to try and soothe babies and toddlers."

The report does not simply identify the problem but also makes a number of detailed recommendations. It concludes that the blame does not lie with the use of these medications to treat addiction, but with the insufficiency of safeguards that could protect children from their parents' and carers' medicines. While the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) do mention the dangers to children from such medicines in their guidelines, there are not currently any details about how to put safeguards in place and how to take

potential dangers into consideration when making decisions about prescribing. The report calls for this to change, along with a number of other practical steps, starting with improving awareness on the issue through national data collection on the number of parents prescribed substitute medications, and the number of children admitted to hospital after consuming them. Improved advice about storing medicines safely should be given, and people prescribed medications for addiction to take home should be given lockable storage boxes and agree safety plans. Adfam also want the issue addressed at all levels, with improved training for everyone from drug treatment workers and pharmacists to GPs and social workers, while they recommend that addiction treatment agencies should have mandatory representation on local Safeguarding Children boards.

Adfam's aim with the report is simple but powerful; through better information and education, they believe children's lives can be saved. As Vivienne Evans writes in the Foreword, it's about refusing to accept the status quo: "We can't just accept that 'these things happen' and we must be louder and more challenging. We think it is possible to make these incidents less likely."