

CRUSHING TIME

When *Druglink* revealed in 2007 that Subutex had become the new drug of choice for many prisoners, it took the Ministry of Justice a year before it admitted to the problem. Now, **Charlotte Tompkins** and **Laura Sheard** report on a study that offers fresh insight into the 'crush and snort' culture within the British prison system.

When setting out to study how the drug use behaviours of injectors were affected when they were sent to prison, we had no idea that a small pharmaceutical tablet would figure so heavily in people's responses. Between 2006 and 2008, 30 male drug users who had recently left prison were interviewed and asked to talk openly about their drug use behind bars. Overwhelmingly, the conversations were dominated by the increased availability and misuse within jails of the heroin substitute pill Subutex.

When used for treating heroin addiction, Subutex – a brand name for the opioid buprenorphine – is designed to be dissolved under the tongue. Some prisons prescribe Subutex to drug users to help control drug withdrawal.

But the users in our study described how in prison, Subutex tablets (known as 'subbies') were commonly crushed into a powder and snorted up the nose. This method of use was reported to have become so common that Subutex was

the drug of choice for most people when they were "banged up". In fact, snorting subbies was felt to be so popular in prisons that it had replaced the use and availability of heroin.

It was often referred to in conversations as the "new gear". Benji, who had been in prison numerous times said: "The drug scene is changing now in jail, it's all Subutex. Nobody bothers doing heroin anymore." Al, 29, stated: "After a few months I tried Subutex, which was beginning to get popular when I first got there. Within a short amount of time it became what everybody wanted. Now, as I understand, it is everything everybody wants all the time." Interestingly, this misuse was not limited to prisons that prescribed Subutex tablets, but also occurred in prisons that did not.

There were many reasons why people snorted Subutex when they were in prison. Its strong, long lasting effect appealed to users. They said that soon

after snorting, they felt a stimulant-like 'buzz'. Once the buzz wore off, a more heroin-like 'gouched' feeling followed, which helped them to sleep at night. This dual effect provided what some described as a "head change" – helping sentences appear to go by more quickly and lessening the boredom of being locked up.

The fact that snorting Subutex could be done in an instant and did not require paraphernalia was seen as a major advantage to using the drug by our interviewees. They suggested that subbie snorting carried far less risk than the continued use of heroin. An overall perception that prison authorities were more tolerant towards Subutex misuse, on account of no or limited testing for the substance (at the time they were in prison) became a further motivation for its use over other illicit drugs. The rise in the availability of Subutex within prisons also accounted for its popularity.

The study revealed there were two



main ways users in prison obtained Subutex. On the one hand, they suggested that it was easily available in those prisons that prescribed the medication for opiate addiction. They would either be prescribed the medication from the prison doctors or they obtained it from fellow prisoners who were prescribed it. Yet, prison health care services were certainly aware of the possibility that prisoners might not take the medication as prescribed. Consequently, prisoners were supervised and observed by prison staff when they administered the tablets. Getting the Subutex to be able to snort it therefore relied on prisoners acting opportunely, such as quickly taking them out of their mouths when nurses' backs were turned.

Smuggled, community prescribed tablets were also available to prisoners. For example, if drug users thought that there was a chance that they would be sent to prison when they were in court, they often prepared themselves for this eventuality by having a supply of Subutex tablets secreted in their anal passage. One man said that he had 50 8mg subbies "plugged" up his backside when he was last sent to prison.

It is well known that drugs, along with other desired commodities, act as a currency in jails. The discussions with former prisoners revealed Subutex to be no exception. The price prisoners charged for tablets varied, broadly reflecting the size and strength of pills – and the availability of the medication within the prison.

Unsurprisingly, prisoners charged the most money where there was limited Subutex availability, particularly in prisons where it was not being prescribed. They also could charge more money for whole tablets, rather than particles. The stronger the tablet, the more money fellow prisoners were charged. Men reported having paid up to £80 for an 8mg tablet. Whilst Subutex



LIFELINE PUBLICATIONS

THE DUAL EFFECT PROVIDED WHAT SOME DESCRIBED AS A "HEAD CHANGE" – HELPING SENTENCES APPEAR TO GO BY MORE QUICKLY AND LESSENING THE BOREDOM OF BEING LOCKED UP

was expensive, it was actually viewed as a more practical and economical drug choice than heroin due to the prolonged high from snorting it and the physical size of the tablets meant smugglers selling it on to fellow inmates could make more money per volume compared to heroin. Derek, 31, said: "£30 for a tablet that size, like you would have to take like three or four bags [of heroin] in for that. Subutex is absolutely tiny. That is the big thing at the moment, the Subutex. It's becoming a bit dangerous."

As Derek mentions, there were dangers surrounding the increased

demand for Subutex in prison. Some prisoners wanted to snort the drug so badly that they obtained it 'on tap,' promising to pay for it later when they had the money or goods to trade as payment. Debt was a real danger linked to this. Men reported that accumulated Subutex debt could result in increased levels of bullying, intimidation and violence amongst prisoners. There were also reports of outbursts of violence between inmates if a prisoner had tried to con their peers by selling products such as paracetamol masked as Subutex.

Using subbies inside not only appeared to help inmates get through their sentence, it had tangible effects on subsequent drug use when they were released back into the community. Clive, a 50-year-old former inmate, was using heroin in various prisons and began snorting Subutex to make himself feel "normal" when he was in withdrawal from heroin. He said that while £10 of heroin would last a couple of hours, £10 of Subutex could last a week. When he was released, he continued to snort Subutex by stockpiling his community prescription – even though he was under supervised consumption.

The full article, *Exploring Prison Buprenorphine Misuse in the United Kingdom: A Qualitative Study of Former Prisoners* by Tompkins, CNE, Wright, NMJ, Waterman, MG & Sheard, L is in the June 2009 edition of the *International Journal of Prisoner Health*. For more information, please contact Charlotte Tompkins c.tompkins@leeds.ac.uk

All interviewees' names have been changed to protect their identity

■ Charlotte Tompkins and Laura Sheard are Research Fellows at Leeds Primary Care Trust