

■ Drinking divide

Researchers have revealed geographical divides in the toll alcohol takes on health and crime. Data collected by the North West Public Health Observatory shows two thirds of areas suffering the highest rates of alcohol-related harm were in the north of England, while areas in and around London registered the highest rate of alcohol-related crime.

■ Drug death city

Brighton and Hove has been named Britain's drug death capital for the seventh time in nine years. Fifty people – averaging nearly one week – died in the city as result of drugs in 2009, said a report from the National Programme on Substance Abuse Deaths (np-SAD).

■ Glasgow weekend

A weekend of events to promote journeys out of drug addiction will take place in Glasgow on September 24-25. The first ever Recovery Weekend, organised by the Scottish Drugs Recovery Consortium and the Recovery Academy, includes a conference, workshops, seminars and a mass walk.

■ Cell death anger

An inquest jury has condemned the “shocking failures” in medical treatment and care received by a long-term heroin user who died in a locked room on a healthcare wing. Jonny Riley, 28, was found hanged in HMP Norwich in 2008 after a series of fits and self harm incidents. The jury criticised the prison system for failing to provide opiate substitutes and adequate self-harm monitoring.

Study: methadone saves lives, prolongs injecting

EXCLUSIVE

Max Daly

Opiate substitution treatment for problem heroin users reduces the risk of death but does not shorten the time they inject street drugs, according to the largest ever study of its kind to be carried out in Britain.

The research, carried out over three decades among 655 injecting heroin users attending a primary care treatment service in Edinburgh, found that for each additional year people took heroin substitutes, chiefly oral methadone, the risk of death fell by 13 per cent, while the length of time they spent injecting drugs rose by 11 per cent.

Of those who did not take up heroin substitute treatment, a quarter died within 25 years of their first injection. This compared to six per cent of those with over five years of substitute treatment.

It found that the average time from first injection to death was 41 years for injecting heroin users without HIV and 24 years for those with the virus.

Of the 655 heroin users recruited to the study between 1980 and 2006 and followed up between 2005 and 2007, 277 had stopped injecting and 228 had died. Nearly a half of all deaths were caused by HIV (45 per cent), while overdose accounted for almost a quarter (24 per cent) and liver disease or injury for 16 per cent.

“Our results confirm the beneficial effects of opiate substitution treatment delivered in routine primary care over long periods. We found a dose-response relation between exposure to such treatment and survival before long-term cessation,” concluded the report, *Survival and cessation in injecting drug users: prospective observational study of outcomes and effect of opiate substitution treatment*. “Opiate substitution treatment might increase survival and reduce morbidity through improving social functioning, reducing criminal activity, and maintaining regular contact between individuals and primary care services.”

But the study, compiled by researchers in Bristol, Edinburgh, Cambridge, London and Australia, and published in the British Medical Journal, added: “The overall median duration of injecting, however, was longer for injecting drug users who were exposed to opiate substitution treatment. It is argued that this treatment confers its health benefit through promoting injection cessation.

“Our data did not support this hypothesis and suggest that it conferred health benefits irrespective of whether injecting drug users continued injecting, though users injected less often when receiving treatment, as consistently shown in clinical trials and observational studies.”

OBITUARY

Martin Plant

Professor Martin Plant, who died on 16th March 2010 aged 63, was a major contributor to our understanding of drug, alcohol and related problems. In a 40-year research career, his prodigious output of dozens of books and hundreds of scientific papers covered epidemiological and behavioural aspects of drug and alcohol misuse, and HIV/AIDS. Many readers will be familiar with a number of his books, from the early ones such as *Drugtakers in an English Town* (1975), or *Drinking Careers* (1979) to his more recent *Binge Britain: Alcohol & the National Response* (with Moira Plant, 2006). The day before he died he submitted the final draft of *Drug Nation*, patterns, problems, panics and policies (with Roy Robertson, Patrick

Miller and Moira Plant) which is due to be published by the end of this year.

Martin was one of nature's great enthusiasts, passionate and forthright, a great collaborator and facilitator of others. He organized the biannual Alcohol Problems Symposia and liked the 'cosy', informal meetings which were such a useful forum, particularly for new researchers, or new-to-alcohol-problems researchers. For this reason his wife and long-term academic collaborator Professor Moira Plant has decided to continue running them. Their continued success will be a fitting tribute to him. He is survived by Moira and their daughter, Emma.

Douglas Cameron