

Introduction

Buprenorphine is registered in Australia for the management of opioid dependence within a framework of medical, social and psychological treatment. Buprenorphine is indicated for use in detoxification and maintenance treatment of opioid dependence. To assist in the safe and effective provision of buprenorphine treatment in Australia, these national guidelines were commissioned by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing under the auspices of the National Expert Advisory Committee on Illicit Drugs (NEACID).

Until recently the only buprenorphine preparation available in Australia for the treatment of opioid dependence was Subutex®, a sublingual tablet containing only buprenorphine (the mono product). A second sublingual tablet preparation, Suboxone®, containing buprenorphine and naloxone (the combination product) was approved by the Therapeutic Goods Administration on 27 July 2005. This revision of the guidelines considers both buprenorphine preparations. The general chemical name “buprenorphine” is used for information that applies to either preparation. Where it is necessary to distinguish between the preparations, the term “mono product” is used for Subutex® and “combination product” is used for Suboxone.

The guidelines have also been updated to reflect changes in research and clinical knowledge of buprenorphine.

There is limited experience with the combination product (Suboxone®), and following its release, a post-marketing surveillance study will be undertaken by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre. This study will assess relative rates of diversion of the mono and combination products, as well as the relative efficacy of these tablets in the usual practice setting. This study is expected to further inform practice in Australia.

Section 1 reviews the clinical pharmacology of the preparations; Section 2 covers the commencement of buprenorphine for either maintenance or withdrawal treatment; Section 3 provides guidance on the use of buprenorphine in maintenance treatment of opioid dependence; Section 4 provides guidance on the use of buprenorphine in the management of opioid withdrawal; Section 5 covers complications and adverse events; and Section 6 discusses prescribing and dispensing issues.

The guidelines have been endorsed by the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians and the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs.