

“WE WEREN’T JUST BREAKING THE LAW BY TAKING DRUGS, WE WERE BREAKING THE LAW BY SIMPLY BEING TOGETHER”: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF PEOPLE ENGAGED IN OPIOID AGONIST TREATMENT AS A COUNTERPUBLIC DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN AUSTRALIA

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Background:

People receiving opioid agonist treatment (OAT) are at higher risk of comorbidities, poverty, and discrimination, which Big Events like the COVID-19 pandemic may exacerbate. The behaviours of people receiving OAT do not always align with normative behaviours as conceived by ruling institutions and laws, and so the group becomes a counterpublic, not imagined in mainstream public discourse.

Methods:

Participants were recruited via eight peer-led organisations across Australia. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were completed between August and December 2020 via telephone and videocall with 40 people receiving OAT. The analysis centres practices of care, allowing interactions that influence the health of participants to be understood in their unique contexts.

Results: Aspects of the COVID-19 state response were designed for an idealised public, demonstrated by the increased policing that accompanied enforcement of restrictions which was detrimental to the wellbeing of people receiving OAT. Counterpublic health strategies employed by people receiving OAT were disrupted, but participants were often able to adapt to the changing context.

Conclusion:

This study is the first to elucidate how practices of care among people receiving OAT are enacted and disrupted during a Big Event, with implications beyond the COVID-19 pandemic for future Big Events. The study findings evidence the need for policies that mitigate the impact of Big Events such as supporting regroupment within the counterpublic, legitimising counterpublic health strategies, and stopping the criminalisation of people who use drugs.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

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