Course and Outcome of HIV-Positive Drug Addicts in a Methadone Treatment Program

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Introduction

In 1987 a methadone treatment program (MTP) was created in Austria following a decree from the federal ministry of health. Target groups are long time drug addicts with HIV infection or those who underwent unsuccessful prior treatments. One of the aims of the MTP was to reduce the spreading of HIV infection.

In Austria a prevalence for HIV infection from 12% to 44% was found among drug addicts in several studies (Blecha et al. 1985, Erlacher 1990, Loimer & Hollerer 1990).

We will introduce the results of the first three years of the MTP in the region of Linz, Upper Austria. The organization of the MTP in Upper Austria provides that several institutions are responsible for the treatment of the participants: the psychiatric state hospital “Wagner-Jauregg-Krankenhaus”, the outpatient centre for drug addicts “Point” and the coordination bureau for the MTP of the public health authority of Upper Austria. Specialized treatment for AIDS is supplied in the General Hospital Linz and the hospital “Elisabethinen”.

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The aim of our study was to examine the social and medical situation of the participants in the MTP three years after its start and to compare the HIV positive group with the HIV negative group regarding their social reintegration (work situation, drug use). For this reason we tried to examine all patients who were in the MTP in November and December 1990, provided that they had participated for at least half a year. We also looked at their reasons for ending the MTP. We also examined the progression of HIV infection among the HIV group since being in the MTP.

**Results**

**Population studied**

In the three years from December 1987 to December 1990, 120 persons were treated with methadone, 31 of them had left the program as of November 1990. Of the 89 patients still in treatment 71 could be interviewed; 18 had been in MTP for less than half a year or did not want to answer our questions. The average time of treatment in the MTP was 21 months.

Among the 71 patients, 39 (24 male, 15 female) were HIV positive and 19 (13 male, 6 female) were negative. In 13 patients the HIV status could not be properly assessed. Regarding the social situation at the beginning of treatment, there were no differences between the HIV positive and negative group: the average age was 29 years, the average duration of addiction 11 years. 85% had been at least once in prison.

**Dropouts.** Among the 31 dropouts from the program 19 persons were HIV positive, 12 HIV negative. In the HIV positive group 8 patients died (3 died of AIDS, the others by suicide or accidents), 5 patients stopped on their own request and 6 persons were suspended from the program. Among the HIV negative group 2 died, 4 stopped on their own request and 6 were suspended.