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Novel psychoactive substance use in Australian prison settings

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Abstract

Background and Aims: People who go to prison often have a history of illicit psychoactive substance use, with some continuing to use these substances in prison. Little is known about the types of psychoactive substances that are used by people incarcerated in Australian prisons, and particularly whether novel psychoactive substances (NPS) are used. This study used data from the Emerging Drugs Network of Australia (EDNA) (2020 – 2025), to identify analytically-confirmed substances in prisoners presenting to Emergency Departments (EDs) with acute drug toxicity.

Design and Methods: Patients presenting to 14 participating EDs across five Australian states with suspected severe and/or unusual acute drug toxicity were identified for inclusion into EDNA and underwent full toxicology testing. These included patients presenting whilst in the custody of corrective services.

Results: There were 21 presentations where individuals arrived at the ED from a prison and were tested, 20 of these tested positive for substances. The most frequent illicit substances identified were methylamphetamine (n=8, 38%) and gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) (n=2, 10%). One patient had an NPS detected (methcathinone).

Conclusions: These results show that people in custody in Australian prisons have either taken illicit psychoactive substances (including NPS) in custody, or possibly just prior to incarceration. This is resulting in some individuals requiring emergency treatment for acute toxicity. More robust research is warranted to understand the prevalence of people in custody at risk of acute toxicity, and from which drugs, so that targeted treatment and harm minimisation approaches can be informed to prevent future drug-related harms.