

# Painkillers become just plain killers

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**More Australians are dying from drug overdoses than are being killed in car accidents, figures reveal.**

**Health groups have called the problem a "silent epidemic" and urged governments to act to minimise the death toll. They say prescription painkillers - such as oxycodone and fentanyl - are increasingly being abused, leading to a spike in accidental overdoses.**

Analysis of Australian Bureau of Statistics data by drug harm minimisation group Anex has revealed that in almost every age group, overdose deaths outstrip car accident fatalities.

The transport death toll is only higher in the 15-to-24 age bracket.

In 2011, there were **241 drug overdose deaths among 25 to 34-year-olds**, compared with 110 on the roads. In the 35-to-44 age group, 234 people lost their lives to drugs, while 82 died in car accidents. Among 45 to 54-year-olds, 75 were killed on the roads in cars, compared with 211 overdose deaths.

Anex chief executive John Ryan said prescription drug abuse was a growing problem and many people were becoming addicted after using the potent medication to treat chronic pain. Often deaths occurred accidentally when people **doubled** their daily dose or combined pills with alcohol.

"This is affecting people from all walks of life, it's not just the cliched drug user on the street. It's very much a general problem in suburbia, in regional and rural areas and right across the age demographic," Mr Ryan said. "It doesn't discriminate between people who are on pain relief because of work-related accidents, or people who have mental health problems and develop an addiction and end up on prescription drugs."

The figures come after Fairfax Media revealed on Saturday that **Australians splurge more than \$7 billion a year on illicit drugs - \$2 billion more than is spent on fashion and nearly double the spending on literature.**

Drug experts said the analysis made a mockery of drug strategies, as Australians spent seven times more buying drugs in 2010 than governments spent enforcing drug laws.

Mr Ryan said governments should follow the lead of the United States and Britain by committing more money to overdose prevention programs.

"We've got a lot of effort and leadership in Australia in relation to the road toll and it's slowly and surely come down, but I don't see the same level of attention and investment in trying to solve the problem of overdose. Fundamentally that's driven by stigma and a denial of the level of the problem."

Anex also wants to see national community rollout of the opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone, which is already widely used by paramedics and emergency department doctors to revive people who have overdosed.

Making the drug available to friends and family members of people at risk of opioid overdose would help to reduce the death toll, Mr Ryan said.

Victoria is already testing the drug at a community level as part of the state government's new drug strategy.

Addiction medicine specialist Professor Jon Currie said the Anex analysis was a "major wake-up call".

"We have become very complacent about our drug overdoses - and drug addiction in general," he said.

He said overdoses of prescription opiates were "becoming more common than heroin", particularly when people were combining the prescription drugs with Valium and Xanax. "It is an epidemic and it is not being recognised by governments and health service planners," he said.

He called for education campaigns, tighter regulations on prescription opiate drugs and more resources to be put into treating drug addiction.

Australian Drug Foundation chief executive John Rogerson agreed that naloxone should be "much more freely available".

He said the rate of Australians using prescription synthetic opiates such as oxycodone was among the highest in the world.

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