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PRESS RELEASE

Wales to roll out once-a-month injection for recovering heroin addicts to help protect NHS staff

Wales will become the first part of the UK to make a new once-a-month injection for recovering heroin addicts routinely available.

The new service will replace daily oral medication services to support recovering addicts, helping to relieve pressure on pharmacy and NHS services during the coronavirus pandemic.

The treatment is a clinically proven, long-lasting injection, which is given once a month. Former heroin users currently receiving a daily oral medication, normally through their community pharmacy, will be screened for their suitability for have the injection of slow-release buprenorphine.

The injection will reduce the amount of contact between individuals and frontline healthcare and pharmacy staff during the coronavirus pandemic, while still continuing to provide substance abuse treatment. It will also be available within prisons in Wales.

Health Minister Vaughan Gething said:

“ Former heroin users are at greater risk of contracting coronavirus because, as a result of their substance misuse, they have poorer immune systems and many will have underlying health conditions.

“ People who sleep rough and who have substance use issues are even more likely to have respiratory conditions and other underlying health problems, which put them at very high risk.

“ This new service will help to ensure people continue to receive support for their addiction and we continue to reduce the risk of spreading coronavirus.

“ The staff in community pharmacies and our substance misuse services are doing an incredible job in very difficult circumstances. Reducing both their workload and the risk to their own health is vital. ”

The new service will reduce pressure on already busy health services and will help to reduce the risk of the coronavirus from repeated daily visits to community pharmacies. It will also ensure those people who need to self-isolate do not need to break quarantine every day to receive daily medication.

An additional £10m has also been made available to help support people who are homeless or sleeping rough during the coronavirus pandemic.

The additional funding, together with the new long-lasting injection service, will help former heroin users who are homeless to self-isolate and follow social distancing rules safely and access handwashing and other basic hygiene facilities.

Housing and Local Government Minister Julie James said:

“ Homelessness and substance misuse often go hand in hand. People experiencing both are particularly vulnerable during this difficult time.

“ The introduction of this treatment, together with the additional funding we have provided to safely house and support those without a home, is an example of how we are working across government to protect those who need it most. ”

Dr Julia Lewis, a consultant addiction psychiatrist, Gwent Specialist Substance Misuse, said:

“ Securing the support of the Welsh Government for this treatment will hugely reduce the pressures on both our services and community pharmacies, enabling us to focus our work on our most vulnerable service users, many of whom have complex needs, including mental health issues. ”

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