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Buprenorphine substitution treatment in France: Drug users' views of the doctor-user relationship

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Abstract

The French system for drug substitution, or maintenance treatment, established in 1996, differs from the often strict conditions attached to methadone clinics in other countries. Because of the predominant role of general practitioners and the flexible prescription rules for Subutex[®] in France, the relationship between the physician and the drug user becomes a central element in the treatment. This article deals with the expectations that these users have of the physician, and their perception of his or her attitude towards them. In order to identify possible reasons for the absence of treatment compliance and of Subutex[®] misuse, it focuses on the users' assessment of the physician's response to the problems they report.

This study, based on a diversified convenience sample of 28 persons (19 men, 9 women)

in treatment, showed 4 patterns of relationships between physicians and users, which differed in their focus: (1) closely focused on the posology of the prescription; (2) compliance with the prescribed regimen is the main issue in a relationship dominated by the physician; (3) an alliance between the physician and the user who is acknowledged as a person, and (4) a instrumental solely on the part of the user, who comes to procure a free, legal drug from a doctor's office. In all four case types, users had difficulty reporting other drug use or intravenous Subutex[®] injection within this relationship, in which the stigma attached to drug dependence seems to reappear. Moreover, the lack of clarity about the treatment objectives and the time frame of the consultation limits the users' ability to integrate the treatment into their lives and to commit themselves to it. The heterogeneity and fragility of the users' situations, and the treatment objectives require regular assessment during contact with the physician. This constant reappraisal of the situation with the physician should help to optimize the treatment and avoid the hiatus that can generate or continue misuse.



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Keywords

France; Drug use; Substitution treatment; Buprenorphine; Doctor-user relationship; Drug users' views

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