



8<sup>th</sup> March 2021

Deputy Seán Crowe, TD  
Dáil Eireann  
Kildare Street  
Dublin 2.

**Re PQ: 10036/21**

To ask the Minister for Health if the HSE has issued guidelines to methadone dispensaries regarding takeaway methadone; and, if so, if the guidance issued will be provided.

Dear Deputy Crowe,

The Health Service Executive has been requested to reply directly to your above Parliamentary Question which you submitted to the Minister for Health for response. I have examined the matter and the following outlines the position:

The COVID-19 pandemic and the requirement to adhere to Public Health guidance issued regularly since March 2020 has been challenging for all health sectors including the Addiction services. At an early stage it was recognised that People Who Use Drugs (PWUD) were a vulnerable population and measures had to be introduced in order to minimise the impact of the virus on the population. This cohort were at risk because of compromised immune systems, underlying health conditions and the possibility of living in crowded environments such as homeless accommodation. There was also the additional concern associated with the risk of overdose in a population where respiratory function could be impaired if Covid was contracted.

The cohort of people with Opioid Dependence and in receipt of Opioid Substitution Treatment, OST (methadone or buprenorphine) required the development of specific interventions to ensure their safety and retain them in treatment. The requirement to engage as many people on OST as quickly as possible in order to ensure safety and enhance survival was recognised and the HSE drew up a number of resource documents and guidance to allow this to happen very early on in the pandemic response. The documents were developed to ensure people could be safely inducted onto OST and continued on OST while keeping in line with Public Health guidance around social distancing and hygiene. This required specific consideration of guidelines around the prescribing and dispensing of methadone and buprenorphine.

In April 2020, the HSE produced a guidance document on Contingency Planning for PWUD

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/other-areas/health-inequalities/contingency-planning-for-people-who-use-drugs.pdf>

This document included specific advice to community pharmacists in relation to all aspects of OST provision including take away doses. This advice had already been issued to all Community



Pharmacies who were involved in dispensing methadone or buprenorphine in the form of a letter from the HSE Liaison Pharmacists in March 2020

[https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/COVID/Contingency\\_measures\\_for\\_Covid-19\\_for\\_patients\\_on\\_OST\\_Community\\_pharmacies.sflb.ashx](https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/COVID/Contingency_measures_for_Covid-19_for_patients_on_OST_Community_pharmacies.sflb.ashx)

Prior to the pandemic and during the pandemic, the HSE have worked closely with the Pharmaceutical Society of Ireland (PSI) on all aspects of methadone/buprenorphine prescribing. There are a couple of layers of PSI guidance starting with general (pre-COVID) advice on Methadone supply,

[https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/Folder\\_Pharmacy\\_Practice\\_Guidance/PPGF\\_03\\_2\\_Guidance\\_for\\_Pharmacists\\_on\\_the\\_Safe\\_Supply\\_of\\_Methadone.sflb.ashx](https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/Folder_Pharmacy_Practice_Guidance/PPGF_03_2_Guidance_for_Pharmacists_on_the_Safe_Supply_of_Methadone.sflb.ashx)

leading up to the recently published **COVID-19 operational standards for pharmacies**. This is a joint safety collaborative between the HSE, PSI, IPU, HPSC and outlines 4 standards required in order to maintain a high level of services while maximising staff and public safety against COVID-19. This is where the Supervising pharmacists might be guided on how to make a decision on balancing methadone supervision with staff exposure.

[https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/Standards/Covid-19\\_Operational\\_Standards\\_for\\_Pharmacies.sflb.ashx](https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/Standards/Covid-19_Operational_Standards_for_Pharmacies.sflb.ashx)

Also during the pandemic, the HSE and the PSI produced a document on home deliveries during COVID which may also be relevant to “methadone takeaways”

[https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/COVID/Home\\_delivery\\_of\\_medicines\\_-\\_Joint\\_guidance\\_from\\_PSI\\_and\\_HSE.sflb.ashx](https://www.thepsi.ie/Libraries/COVID/Home_delivery_of_medicines_-_Joint_guidance_from_PSI_and_HSE.sflb.ashx)

Finally, the advice on the safe storage of medications was to be given to the person on OST and the HSE leaflet on storage of methadone was recirculated to all pharmacies

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/primarycare/socialinclusion/homelessness-and-addiction/addiction-treatment-and-rehabilitation/keeping-children-safe.pdf>

The principle aim of the HSE during the pandemic was to ensure the safety of PWUD and to support services providing care with the development of all the guidance documents outlined above. The HSE worked closely with the PSI to ensure that Community Pharmacies were informed of developments and supported throughout the crisis. At all times, the HSE Liaison pharmacists were available for Community Pharmacists to discuss any concerns they may have had about an issue in relation to OST.

There were an additional 863 people commenced on OST during 2020.

I trust this information is of assistance to you but should you have any further queries please contact me.

Yours sincerely,



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Dr. Eamon Keenan  
National Clinical Lead – Addiction Services