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A functional dependence? A social history of the medical use of morphine in Australia

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The wide availability of opioids continued unregulated, with neither the public nor government expressing appetite for change, for two main reasons. First, the morbidity associated with infantile diarrhoea ensured great public support for unrestricted availability of a possible remedy. Second, the Australian population was widely dispersed, and with few experienced medical practitioners there was a need for fast access to these medications.10

However, the harmful effects of opioids became increasingly evident over time. In the 1880s, Queensland coroners investigated 98 infant deaths and determined that 15 of these children had been given “infant soother” drugs, most of which contained opioids.10 Coronial records demonstrate that increasing numbers of infant deaths related to opioids were investigated in the 1890s and early 20th century, and doctors became reluctant to sign death certificates in cases where opioids had been used.10 While anxiety surrounding the overuse of opioids for infants grew, for many, the benefits continued to outweigh possible harms.

Australian society seemed largely indifferent to the use of medical opioids for recreational or habitual use, as this practice remained mostly invisible and of little moral consequence.5 The use of opium for smoking was viewed differently, being closely associated with the Chinese population and carrying particular social and racial

The history of morphine use in Australia has shaped public perception and current challenges

Morphine has had an important role in the history of Australia and continues to play a major part in the medical, social and economic aspects of this country.1 The extent of its multitude of uses (and misuses), its constant depiction in the media, and its role in the history of Australia have created a complex public understanding of the drug. There is a broad array of history of Australia have created a complex public understanding of the drug. There is a broad array of

Growing concerns

Opium was widely used and unregulated in colonial Australia, although records of its early use are incomplete. Increased use coincided with the arrival of Chinese immigrants during the gold rush of the 1850s, as this population had high rates of opium use for recreational purposes following British importation of opium to China and the subsequent Opium Wars.5,7,8 It was widely available as a raw product, often used for smoking or dissolved in alcohol as a mixture known as laudanum.

Morphine was originally isolated from opium in 1804 by German pharmacist Friedrich Sertürner, but it was initially difficult and expensive to manufacture.9 Laudanum, by contrast, was readily available, cheaper, well known to
remaining unchanged as a medication since its discovery, its uses and perception have changed considerably and have been profoundly affected by the legal and political climate in a manner unlike few, if any, other medications in Australia. The place of morphine in our society has been transformed from one of widely unregulated acceptability to decades of intense scrutiny governed by a legal and regulatory framework and increasing levels of public concern. Its uses extend beyond the scope of the medical sphere, as a device of recreation and habit, and also as an important source of legal export income — opioid production is worth about $100 million annually to the Australian economy.1

What the future holds for morphine is uncertain. The history of its use demonstrates the harms of poor regulation and, with a rising tide of deaths attributable to opioids in Australia and internationally, this appears to again be an increasing problem.3 Yet to strictly control these medications, as was done in the mid 20th century, is not without its costs. Society has been adversely affected by the decision to persecute doctors and to not allow supervised access to these medications for patients with genuine pain. Government and media condemnation of opioid use has had a detrimental impact on the public perception of opioids, especially in oncology and treatment of terminal disease, where they may be needed most.2

The impact of the history of use, legal and political attention and media scrutiny appears to have had a significant effect on society’s understanding of morphine. An understanding of the past may provide greater insight into the full effect of this evolving social history, enrich our clinical discussions and provide a discourse to guide future use.

Competing interests: Matthew Grant has previously worked as a pharmacovigilance physician at Merck Sharp & Dohme, but he has no ongoing relationship with the company.

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