

## **Abstract**

**Background:** In Kazakhstan, opioid substitution therapy (OST) has been a controversial topic since its introduction in 2008.

**Aim:** To examine and analyse factors influencing approach towards OST among OST patients, opioid-dependent drug users who could re-consider engagement in this therapeutic method, as well as attitudes of selected key organisations and their representatives.

**Methods:** A survey method complemented by semi-structured individual and group interviews has been selected. One hundred respondents participated in the study between October and December 2015. The first group consisted of 46 OST patients. The second group consisted of 54 respondents who met criteria for opioid dependence. This group included patients of residential treatment centres, former OST patients and current injecting drug users. Key persons were interviewed about their attitudes.

**Results:** Patients receiving OST, with the average treatment duration of 29.4 months, reported improved health, improved social functioning and financial well-being, as well as reduction of their involvement in crime. This group showed better results in all examined categories. Most (80 %) were satisfied with the treatment, even though a number of shortcomings have been reported. All OST patients considered necessary to expand the availability of OST in Kazakhstan. Feedback of the second group of respondents was significantly different ( $p < 0,001$ ): 40.7% of respondents considered necessary to expand the availability of OST and 38.9% took the opposite view.

Survey with key interviewees showed significant differences in their view about the OST. While a positive opinion of the Director of the *National Scientific and Practical Centre on Medical and Social Problems of Drug Addiction* has been carefully articulated and based on publicly available data, the president of the National Medical Association has been evasive, refusing to share studies results and using emotional axiomatic statements to support a resolutely adverse position towards OST.

**Conclusions:** Although OST patients perceived OST as unanimously efficacious and beneficial, negative attitudes persist among many other respondents. Further interventions should focus on expanding treatment availability and matching its design to patient's needs so that the psychosocial wellness is prioritized; quality controls by independent experts and systematic education on OST for narcologists and all medical professionals should be performed routinely and on continuous basis.

**Keywords:** Kazakhstan, opioid addiction, medical treatment, harm reduction, substitution treatment, methadone

