

## Methadone Treatment in Hong Kong: History, Strategy and Results

Experiences from the AIDS Response in China

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### History

The Hong Kong Methadone Treatment Programme (MTP) is operated by the Department of Health of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region. It started in 1972 as a pilot project, serving primarily as a crime prevention initiative. In 1976, it was formally launched and currently there are 20 clinics across the region. Today, the programme has become well accepted and broadly recognized.

### Objectives

Today's Hong Kong MTP serves four main objectives

- It provides a readily accessible, legal, medically safe, and effective alternative to opiates and drug use.
- It reduces the harmful consequences associated with drug use and the sharing of contaminated needles and syringes by providing an oral substitute, thereby preventing the spread of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other blood-borne diseases, such as viral hepatitis and tetanus.
- It reduces crime by eliminating the financial burden of making daily purchases of illicit drugs and helps to stabilize the lives of drug users.
- It enables drug users to live normal and productive lives and to continue to contribute to society. It also provides an entry point to voluntary detoxification programmes.

### Outcomes of the MTP

For society at large, methadone treatment generates a number of positive outcomes. Service data in Hong Kong show that:

#### Methadone prevents crime

In Hong Kong, 26 percent of the drug users entering the programme have prior criminal convictions often related to illicit drugs. However, only 4 percent of methadone users on the programme have received a conviction after entering treatment.<sup>1</sup>

#### Methadone allows drug users to become and remain productive members of society

Over 70 percent of Hong Kong's methadone users are employed, working, and thus contributing to society.

#### Methadone prevents the spread of HIV

One of the most remarkable successes of the methadone programme in Hong Kong is that it has kept HIV prevalence at about 0.3 to 0.4 percent among participants.

#### HIV Prevalence among MTP Clients

Year	Prevalence
2004	0.20 %
2005	0.32 %
2006	0.36 %
2007	0.36 %
2008	0.47 %

<sup>1</sup> Unless indicated otherwise, the source of information is the Department of Health, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

## Case Study

Ying (not her real name) is a 25 year old female and a former heroin user. She started to inhale heroin when she was 15. She made several attempts to quit without help, but failed every time. At 17, she finally started methadone treatment with a stable intake of 25 mg per day. When she was 23 (after 6 years of methadone maintenance) she joined the detoxification programme under the Hong Kong MTP and she was successfully detoxified 6 months later. She currently works as a clerical officer at a secondary school and she has successfully reestablished positive relations with her relatives.



### **Methadone reduces intravenous drug use**

Around 40 percent of the drug users admitted into Hong Kong's methadone programme regularly injected illicit drugs at the time of admission. After entering the programme less than 10 percent of clients continue to inject drugs.

### **Minimal adverse effects on clients**

Methadone provides a safe and effective oral treatment for heroin addiction. For regular users, it is unlikely to lead to drowsiness, sedation, or intoxication. Methadone has no adverse effects on motor skills, mental capacity or employability. It can help drug users to live normal and productive lives. However, "overdosing" is possible in cases of concurrent use with other drugs, and hence caution is necessary.

### **Explaining the results**

The results generated by the Hong Kong Methadone Treatment Programme rest on a number of critical factors. These include:

### **Policy commitment**

With policy commitment from the Security Bureau, the Hong Kong MTP has established an extensive network across the territory, which provides an effective "safety net" in preventing drug-related crime.

### **Ease and convenience of admission**

Potential participants can join the programme after presenting a valid Hong Kong identity card or passport. There is no need for referral neither is there need for an appointment. There is no waiting list, people can show-up any time during opening hours, and they can reenter the programme at will after dropping out. However, entry does require that it is established that the client is a drug user, which is assessed on-site by a trained physician. The admitting physician also ensures that a patient entering the programme does not suffer from any serious medical conditions prohibitive to methadone treatment.

### **Sufficient and adjustable dosage**

An adequate dosage of methadone is provided

to ensure compliance and prevent relapse into heroin use.

### Affordability

Participants are required to pay just 1 HK\$ per dose (23 HK\$ for non-residents). The very low costs of participating in the programme constitute a critical cornerstone of its success.

### Protection of clients and confidentiality

User records are strictly confidential and are not shared with law enforcement or other government departments.

### Ease and convenience of access

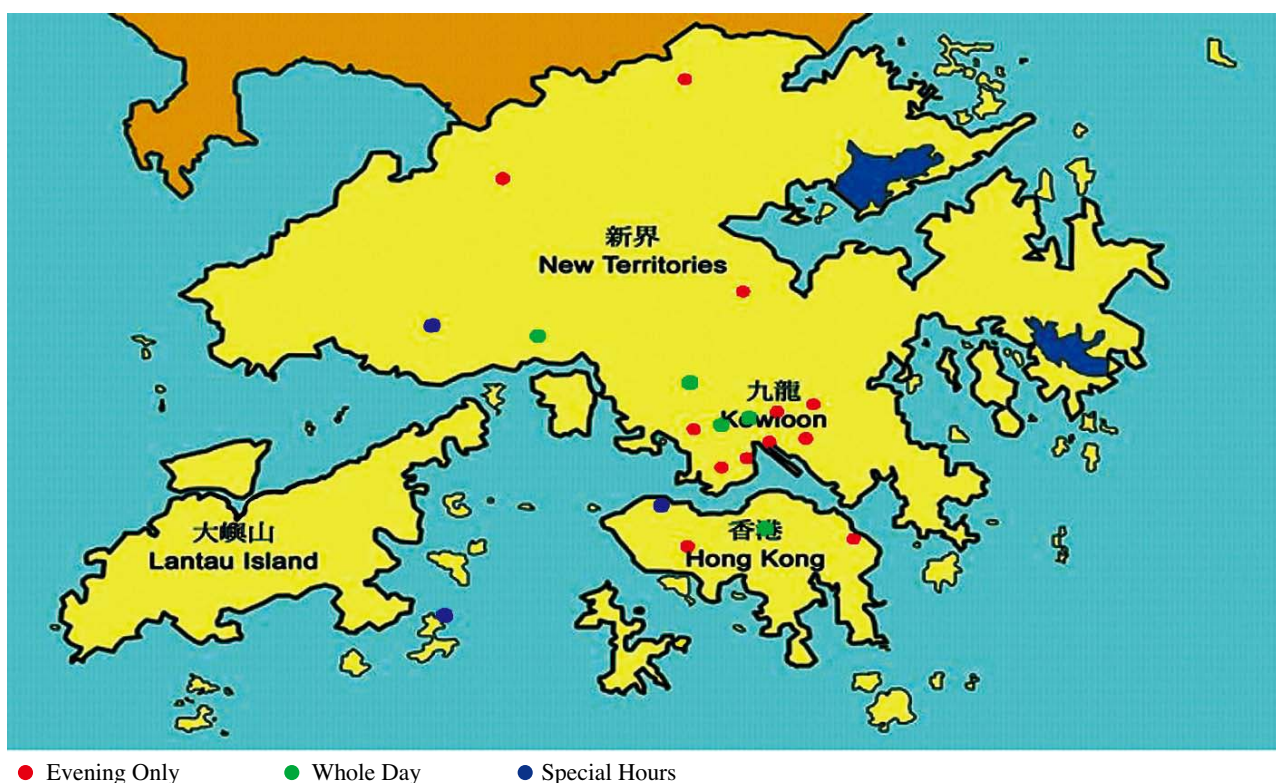
Hong Kong has built up a system with a high degree of coverage. There are 20 community-based clinics across the territory, usually located

alongside other healthcare services. Due to the high coverage of clinics, about 60 percent of Hong Kong's heroin users live within 1.5 km of a methadone clinic<sup>2</sup>. Equally important, opening times extend beyond office hours and methadone is available from 7:00 to 22:00 to facilitate those who are employed and working.

Opening hours for Hong Kong's methadone clinics.

Type	Number	Service Hours
Whole Day	5	7:00 to 22:00
Evening Only	12	18:00 to 22:00
Special Hours	3	13:00 to 20:00
		7:00 to 17:00
		15:00 to 22:00

Location of Hong Kong's Methadone Clinics



<sup>2</sup> Tak Ting P Pang & Shui Shan Lee, *Measuring the geographic coverage of methadone maintenance programme in Hong Kong by using geographic information system (GIS)*, *International Journal of Health Geographics*, 30 January 2008.

## Linking to health and social services

Hong Kong's methadone clinics have provided an important channel linking marginalized people to health and social services.

Apart from medical assessments by doctors, services provided at the clinics include counseling by doctors, social workers and peer counselors, referral services, (e.g. referral of HIV positive methadone users to the Department of Health HIV clinic) and tetanus vaccination.

### MTP Clinic in Hong Kong



Additionally, the clinics constitute an effective channel for HIV surveillance amongst methadone users. They also provide a critical entry point for monitoring clients' behavioral risks, such as injecting drug use and needle sharing, and unprotected sex with multiple partners.

Finally, the clinics also provide a base for outreach work, including disseminating information, such as HIV prevention messages, and distributing condoms. Testing and counseling for both HIV and Hepatitis B is also among the services available. The service is voluntary and free of charge.

美沙酮診所  
愛滋病毒抗體尿液普及測試  
Universal HIV Antibody Urine Testing in  
Methadone Clinics

檢查清楚 及早治療  
Early detection for early treatment

詳情請與美沙酮診所職員聯絡  
Please contact the staff in Methadone Clinics for further information

愛滋熱線  
AIDS Hotline : 2780 2211  
愛滋熱線網頁 AIDS Hotline Website :  
www.27802211.com

傷害熱線  
Harm Reduction Hotline : 2112 9977  
傷害網頁 Harm Reduction Website :  
www.harmreduction-hk.com

For convenience of both clinic staff and clients, HIV testing is carried out annually using urine tests rather than blood tests.

### Further information on MTP in Hong Kong and beyond is available at

Department of Health, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region  
<http://www.dh.gov.hk/scindex.html>

The Red Ribbon Centre, Hong Kong: <http://www.info.gov.hk/aids/rrc/english/main.htm>

UNODC: <http://www.unodc.org>

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