



HIFA discussion on opioids: a reference for our thematic discussion, 13 April to 8 May 2026

Landing page

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<https://www.hifa.org/news/hifa-announces-deep-dive-discussion-global-opioid-crisis-starting-13-april-2026>

Objectives

This forum aims to:

- Encourage educational institutions to develop and strengthen resources to address opioid use, especially within primary health care.
- Promote a better understanding among health professionals of the magnitude of the problem and equip them with effective tools to intervene in opioid use disorders.

More than identifying problems, this forum seeks to build collective solutions. The diversity of experiences across countries and regions presents a unique opportunity to move towards:

- More effective and contextualized responses
- Better-prepared health systems
- More balanced and evidence-based public policies that recognize social determinants of substance abuse and the commercial interests that feed them.
- More humane, people-centered, and stigma-free care

Active participation, open exchange, and dialogue among key stakeholders will be fundamental to generating shared learning and moving towards more comprehensive responses.

Your participation is key to this process.

1. Introduction

Opioid misuse and related disorders represent one of the most complex and dynamic challenges in global public health. Although the magnitude and characteristics of the problem vary across countries, there is growing concern about the increase in consumption, the diversification of substances—including synthetic opioids such as fentanyl—and the associated health, social, and economic consequences. This forum aims to create a space for exchange among health professionals, policymakers, and key stakeholders to analyze the current situation, share experiences, and move toward more effective, comprehensive, and evidence-based responses.

How can we define opioid use disorders?

The crisis relates to three types of opioids:

1. Natural (eg morphine, codeine)
2. Semisynthetic (eg oxycodone, heroin)
3. Synthetic (eg fentanyl)

Opioid misuse leads to considerable morbidity and mortality.

Chronic health effects include dependence and addiction (opioid use disorder) with tolerance and withdrawal; infectious diseases (e.g. HIV, hepatitis C) from injection use; mental health disorders (depression, anxiety); chronic constipation, hormonal dysfunction, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, family breakdown, crime, and impact on relatives, spouses, children.

Opioids cause around 480,000 deaths per year worldwide, of which about 150,000 are due to overdose.

Opioids are the dominant cause of drug-related deaths.

Example: United States (illustrates scale) ~80,000 deaths from opioids

LMICs have increasing opioid use but less surveillance data and less access to treatment (e.g. methadone, naloxone).

The burden is highest in North America but is rising globally.

2. What is the current state of opioid misuse in your country?

- What is the magnitude and trend of opioid use and misuse?
- What factors are driving its increase?
- What role has medical prescription played in this phenomenon?
- What other factors should we consider?
- What impact do synthetic opioids like fentanyl have?

It is also essential to analyse the social determinants:

- How do poverty, trauma, and social exclusion influence this?
- Are there any particularly vulnerable populations?

This analysis will allow us to identify similarities and differences between countries, as well as common structural factors.

3. Do people understand the health and socioeconomic damage caused by opioid misuse?

Social understanding of the problem influences both prevention and access to treatment.

Reflection is encouraged on the following:

- Do people understand the health and socio-economic harms of opioid misuse? What matters to them? How can they be better informed? How to reduce stigma? Does the population recognize the magnitude of the health and socioeconomic damage?
- What are the main social concerns regarding this issue?
- What level of information exists and how can it be improved?

What can be done to raise awareness among the public, and especially young people about the harms of opioid misuse?

A critical aspect is stigma:

- How does it impact the search for help?
- How does it affect the quality of care?
- What strategies can reduce it?

4. What can be done to raise public awareness about the harms of opioid misuse?

Prevention, especially among young people, is key to reducing the future burden. Consider the following:

- What strategies are most effective for raising public awareness?
- How can risks be communicated without generating stigma?
- What role can schools, the community, the media, and social networks play?

5. Role of the pharmaceutical industry

- Has the pharmaceutical industry influenced the development of the problem in your country? What evidence exists?
- What regulatory mechanisms are necessary?
- What is the role of the pharmaceutical industry?
- What can be done to address misinformation from the pharmaceutical industry and other sources?

6. How can we identify and manage opioid use disorders?

The healthcare system plays a central role in early detection and treatment. The following questions will be discussed:

- What are the clinical signs of problematic use? Are healthcare professionals aware of them? Have they been trained to recognize them?
- What screening tools are used in practice?
- How can the topic be addressed with patients without causing stigma?
- What actions should be taken when misuse is suspected?
- How does stigma influence access to and continuity of treatment?

7. What interventions are available in your countries when addressing opioid use disorders? What are the barriers to their implementation?

The response to opioid use disorder requires a comprehensive approach. We invite you to consider:

Available interventions:

- Pharmacological treatments (methadone, buprenorphine, naloxone)

- Psychosocial interventions
- Harm reduction strategies

Barriers:

- Limited access to services
- Regulatory restrictions
- Lack of training
- Institutional stigma

In addition:

What strategies are being implemented to improve adherence and prevent relapses?

- Supply reduction: eg. Prescription monitoring and control systems, Regulation of opioid manufacturing and distribution, etc.;
- Demand reduction: Better public awareness, Training for healthcare providers, etc;
- Harm reduction: Access to naloxone, Supervised consumption sites, Decriminalization, Integrated mental health and social support

8. Do healthcare professionals have adequate knowledge to prevent and treat opioid use disorders in their patients?

The preparation of healthcare professionals is a critical element. The following topics are proposed for discussion:

- Do professionals have the necessary knowledge?
- What are their main concerns?
- How can training be strengthened?

Do health workers have adequate knowledge to prevent and manage opioid use disorders among their patients? What matters to them? How can they be better informed?

In particular:

- How can this content be integrated into medical education?
- What role can professional associations play?
- How can professional education be improved to ensure health workers are adequately prepared to diagnose and manage opioid use disorder?

It is also relevant to address:

- Perceptions about opioid agonist therapy (OAMT, eg methadone)
- Cultural or professional barriers to its implementation

9. What are the current national policies in your country?

Addressing this problem requires balanced policies that prioritize both control and public health. The following are invited for analysis:

- What policies currently exist in your countries?
- Which policies have proven effective? Are they being implemented effectively?
- Which policies have proven ineffective or harmful?
- Do public health professionals and policymakers have adequate knowledge to prevent and treat opioid use disorders in their country?
- What are current national policies and what more can be done to fully implement those policies?

Key aspects include:

- Balancing drug control with access to treatment
- Supporting policymakers to implement evidence-based policies

How can policymakers be supported to deliver evidence-informed policy and practice to address the opioid crisis?

10. Do you believe that current regulations are affecting the appropriate treatment of people with chronic pain for whom opioid use is indicated?

A critical challenge is preventing restrictive policies from hindering appropriate pain management. The following questions will be discussed:

- Do current regulations limit access to opioids when indicated?
- When is their use justified?
- What does the “right to pain relief” entail?
- How should patients with pain and a history of opioid use be managed?

Eduardo Bianco & Neil Pakenham-Walsh, 9 April 2026