MONASH University

MONASH
MEDICINE
NURSING AND
HEALTH SCIENCES

MONASH ADDICTION RESEARCH CENTRE

2025
ANNUAL REPORT

2025 SNAPSHOT

160 MEMBERS

The MARC membership now comprises 160 academics from across Monash University, making us one of the largest addiction research centres in the world.

261 PUBLICATIONS

MARC members published over 260 peer-reviewed journal articles in the field of addiction, with 78% published in Q1 journals.

OVER $47M IN FUNDING

Our members were Chief Investigators on addiction-related grants totalling over $47M.

1139 MEDIA MENTIONS

MARC researchers were featured in the media more than 1,100 times, spanning radio, television, online, and print outlets.

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ABOUT US

The Monash Addiction Research Centre (MARC) brings together world-leading expertise from across Monash University and the sector to provide solutions to the challenges of addiction.

MARC consists of a small hub of staff at the Monash Peninsula Campus and a larger virtual network of 160 academics across seven faculties and five institutes, making us one of the largest addiction research centres in the world.

Our mission is to provide national thought leadership, education and research excellence to develop, deliver and evaluate effective policy and practice approaches for addiction. We work in partnership to achieve this by:

USING DATA FOR IMPACT

We generate and integrate high quality datasets to provide timely and accessible insights that drive policy reform, service improvement, and practice change.

TRANSFORMING PRACTICE

We develop, trial and implement evidence-based approaches in active partnership with community organisations, health services, and people with relevant lived and living experience, developing local solutions that can be scaled nationally.

CHANGING THE CONVERSATION

We challenge stigma and shift public narratives by bringing together diverse perspectives through thought leadership, expert commentary, and dissemination of evidence.

ENABLING THE WORKFORCE

We build expertise in addiction and frontline sectors, expand research capacity across the treatment and policy system, and cultivate a vibrant, interdisciplinary community.

OUR AIM

MARC is dedicated to finding solutions that transform the way we think about and respond to addiction.

MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTORS

We are pleased to present the Monash Addiction Research Centre's Annual Report for 2025

In 2025, MARC experienced exceptional growth across research, funding, and impact. MARC members secured more than $47 million in addiction-related grants as Chief Investigators, over twice the funding secured in 2024. This remarkable achievement reflects both the scale and quality of research led by our members.

Research output and visibility also increased significantly, with more than 260 publications and over 1,100 media mentions across print, online, television, and radio. Together, these accomplishments demonstrate the continuing influence of MARC and the meaningful contribution our members are making to the field of addiction.

Throughout the year, MARC delivered a range of professional development, networking, and training opportunities. A key highlight was the MARC Research Symposium, which brought together leading voices from across Monash University and the broader addiction sector. The program featured a dynamic panel on embedding evidence into policy and practice, alongside an invited address by Associate Professor Shalini Arunogiri on clinical trials at MARC.

MARC remains deeply committed to supporting the next generation of researchers. Our PhD and Early- and Mid-Career Researcher (EMCR) networks continue to provide valuable platforms for professional development, collaboration, mentorship, and connection. In 2025, the PhD network grew to 32 members, while the EMCR network expanded to more than 50 researchers.

The MARC Policy Team continued its strong advocacy for people living with addiction and their families through active engagement with government and key stakeholders. This included submissions to the Productivity Commission's interim report on the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement and to the Therapeutic Goods Administration's review of the safety and regulatory oversight of unapproved medicinal cannabis products.

Many MARC members were recognised in 2025 for their leadership and contributions to the field. Among them, Dr Louisa Picco received the Public Health Researcher Award at the 2024–25 Premier's Awards for Health and Medical Research, and paramedic scientist Dr Ziad Nehme was awarded the 2025 Commonwealth Health Minister's Award for Excellence in Health and Medical Research. These honours reflect the significant impact of MARC's research and leadership.

We congratulate and thank all MARC members for their dedication and commitment to addressing the complex challenges of addiction. We also extend our sincere appreciation to the MARC advisory board, theme leaders, research partners, and the community for their ongoing support. We look forward to continuing this collaborative work in 2026 to improve outcomes for people affected by addiction.

PROFESSOR DAN LUBMAN AM
Director

PROFESSOR SUZANNE NIELSEN
Deputy Director

GOVERNANCE

MARC Director, Professor Dan Lubman AM, oversees the Centre's research and operations and plays a key role in advancing industry engagement activities. Deputy Director, Professor Suzanne Nielsen, plays an instrumental role in fostering research collaborations, supporting early and mid-career researcher development, and strengthening the strategic development of key initiatives in the Frankston–Mornington Peninsula region. The Centre is further supported by core staff, including members of the strategy and business operations team.

EXECUTIVE MANAGEMENT / SENIOR LEADERSHIP

PROFESSOR DAN LUBMAN AM
Director

PROFESSOR SUZANNE NIELSEN
Deputy Director

STRATEGY AND BUSINESS OPERATIONS

LEANNE VOSPER
Research Program Officer

DR KIRSTY SCHOLES BALOG
Research Program Officer

JONATHAN MEDDINGS
Policy and Engagement Manager

CARLA ITALIA
Knowledge Translation Officer

RESEARCH STAFF

DR TINA LAM
Senior Research Fellow

DR TING XIA
Senior Research Fellow

DR LOUISA PICCO
Research Fellow

DR ALI CHEETHAM
Research Fellow

DR MONICA JUNG
Research Fellow

FRED FOX
Research Officer

ROSE LAING
Research Officer

NILAKSHI GUNATILLAKA
Research Officer

MARC THEME LEADERS

MARC's Theme Leader Group is collectively responsible for informing the Centre's strategic direction and facilitating the sharing of information about activities and opportunities across MARC. Theme Leaders represent one of MARC's three key research themes and act as a conduit between the Centre and the departments and faculties in which they are based.

SCIENCE

PROF ANTONIO VERDEJO-GARCIA
Turner Institute for Brain and Mental Health

PROF ADRIAN CARTER
Monash Bioethics Centre

DR DAN FEHRING
Turner Institute for Brain and Mental Health

A/PROF JENNIFER SCHUMANN
Department of Forensic Medicine

DR ALENE YONG
Centre for Medicine Use and Safety

PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

PROF PAUL DIETZE
Burnet Institute; NDRI

PROF ARON SHLONSKY
Department of Social Work

PROF VICTORIA MANNING
Turning Point

A/PROF SHALINI ARUNOGIRI
Turning Point

CULTURE AND POLICY

PROF PHILIP MENDES
Department of Social Work

PROF DENNIS PETRIE
Centre for Health Economics

A/PROF SONJA DE NEW
Centre for Health Economics

DR ROWAN OGEIL
Turning Point

DR MICHAEL SAVIC
Turning Point

MARC ADVISORY BOARD

MARC's External Advisory Board comprises representatives from a broad range of key stakeholders and partners, bringing together significant expertise and leadership. The Board supports MARC in its mission to deliver national solutions to the challenges of addiction by increasing the Centre's visibility within the community and supporting the work of its members.

CHAIR: MIETTA GIBSON

As Chair of the MARC Advisory Board, Ms Gibson brings together her professional expertise and lived experience of supporting a family member with addiction and mental health challenges. In this role, she is also proud to represent her local Mornington Peninsula community.

BOARD MEMBERS

JAGJIT DHALIWAL
Executive Director, Service Development & Reform, North Western Melbourne Primary Health Network

ADJ A/PROF PAUL BUNTINE
Executive Director of the Eastern Health Institute, Director of Emergency Medicine Research at Eastern Health, an Emergency Physician at Box Hill Hospital and an Adjunct Clinical Associate Professor at Monash University (Eastern Health Clinical School)

CHRIS CHRISTOFOROU
CEO, Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association

KRIS DREW
Director AOD Policy and Programs, Victorian Department of Health

ADJ A/PROF HELEN COOPER
CEO, Peninsula Health

PROF SHANTHAKUMAR WILSON RAJARATNAM
Head of the School of Psychological Sciences, Monash University

JANE LONDON
Deputy Chief Executive Officer and Executive Director Strategy and Service Design, Eastern Melbourne Primary Health Network

DR ZIAD NEHME
Director of Research and Evaluation, Ambulance Victoria

CLARE DAVIES
CEO, Self Help Addiction Resource Centre

ROD MACKINTOSH
South East Public Health Unit. Health Promotion and Partnerships. Monash Health

2025 MARC RESEARCH SYMPOSIUM

In May 2025, MARC held its biannual Research Symposium, bringing together leading voices from across Monash University and the broader sector for a dynamic day of discussion and knowledge exchange focused on harms relating to alcohol, other drugs, and gambling. Highlights included an inspiring panel discussion where high-level policymakers and sector leaders reflected on how to embed evidence into everyday policy and systems, a keynote by Matt Craig (NSW Department of Health) underscoring the critical role of translating research into effective, real-world policy, and an invited address by Associate Professor Shalini Arunogiri on clinical trials at MARC, illustrating the full research pipeline from innovation to implementation.

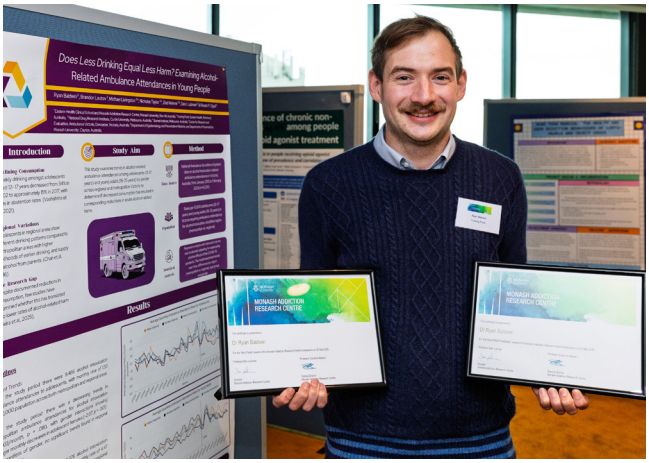
Panel discussion on how to embed evidence into everyday policy and systems. L-R: MARC Advisory Board Chair Mietta Gibson (moderator), Matt Craig (NSW Health), Kris Drew (Victorian Department of Health), and Phillipa Thomas (Mental Health Victoria)

At the conclusion of the event, the winners of the MARC Publication Prizes were announced. Dr Monica Jung was presented with the 2025 MARC PhD Publication award for her paper titled Opioid characteristics and nonopioid interventions associated with successful opioid taper in patients with chronic noncancer pain.

Dr Ryan Baldwin was the recipient of the 2025 MARC EMCR Publication award for his paper titled Differences in ambulance attendances between children with and without an identified history of out-of-home care.

Dr Ryan Baldwin was also the recipient of the ‘Best Poster’ award, for his poster titled ‘Does less drinking mean less harm? Examining alcohol-related ambulance attendances in young people’. This award was voted on by symposium attendees.

Richard Armour was the winner of the ‘Best Presentation from an Emerging Researcher’ award, for his presentation titled ‘Initiation of opioid agonist therapy using buprenorphine in the emergency department or emergency out of hospital setting: A mixed-methods systematic review’, again voted on by the symposium attendees.



PHD AND EARLY- & MIDDLE-CAREER RESEARCHER (EMCR) NETWORKS

The MARC PhD Network currently comprises 32 doctoral candidates, while the MARC EMCR Network encompasses more than 50 early- and mid-career researchers undertaking addiction-related research across Monash University. Collectively, these networks foster professional development, collaboration, and peer learning through targeted training and networking opportunities.

In November 2025, the MARC PhD and EMCR Networks jointly hosted guided tours of the newly established permanent pill testing facility in Fitzroy, Melbourne. The visits provided members with valuable, first-hand insight into the operation of this innovative service and its role in empowering individuals with accurate, evidence-based information to support safer and informed decision-making.

AWARDS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Many MARC members were recognised for their outstanding achievements in 2025.

Notably, the Prescription Opioid Safety Toolkit received a prestigious Australian Good Design Award (Gold) and was also honoured with the Victorian Premier's Design Award for Service Design. The project team included MARC Deputy Director Suzanne Nielsen (project lead), MARC Research Fellow Dr Louisa Picco, and Dr Alex Waddell and Dr Dhruv Basur from Monash University's Action Lab.

Dr Louisa Picco, NHMRC Emerging Leader Research Fellow and MARC Program Lead for Drug Policy and Harm Reduction, was awarded the Public Health Researcher Award at the 2024–25 Premier's Awards for Health and Medical Research in recognition of her work to address and reduce opioid-related harm.

Centre Director, Professor Dan Lubman AM, was elected as a fellow to the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences (AAHMS), one of the highest honours in Australian health and medical sciences.

Dr Louisa Picco was also the recipient of the Kyp Kypri Early Career Award at the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD) conference and Professor Suzanne Nielsen, Centre Deputy Director, was inducted as the APSAD President, recognising her leadership in the field.

Paramedic scientist Dr Ziad Nehme was awarded the 2025 Commonwealth Health Minister's Award for Excellence in Health and Medical Research. This award is given annually to the top-ranked NHMRC Investigator Grant in the Emerging Leadership Level 2 category in the previous year's round.

Dr Amanda Roxburgh received the Jim and Margaret Beever Fellowship at the Burnet Institute in recognition of her research into improving health outcomes for people who use alcohol and other drugs.

FUNDING SUCCESS

In 2025, MARC researchers secured more than $47 million in addiction-related grants as Chief Investigators. Below are just a few examples that showcase this extraordinary success and reflect the strong interdisciplinary collaboration that underpins our research community.

RELIEVE - **R**ESEARCH INTO **E**FFECTIVE TREATMENTS FOR PAIN AND OPIOID DEPENDENCE INCORPORATING **LI**VED **E**XPERIENCE **V**OICES AND **E**VIDENCE

Investigators: **Prof Suzanne Nielsen,** Clare Davies, A/Prof Claire Ashton-James, Dr Rhiannon Dowla, A/Prof Megan Lim, A/Prof Bridin Murnion, Prof Paul Glare, **Jie Yang**, Sarah Lord, **Prof Paul Dietze**, A/Prof Peter Higgs, **Dr Bosco Rowland**, Dr Paul MacCartney, **Dr Louisa Picco, Dr Ali Cheetham**, Sione Crawford, **Prof Dan Lubman**, Andrea Fischer, Lisa Jarvie, Prof Apo Demirkol, **Prof Dennis Petrie**

Almost one in two people in opioid dependence treatment (i.e., prescribed buprenorphine or methadone) have current chronic non-cancer pain. Yet, despite the high prevalence, chronic pain is often severe and undertreated in people with opioid dependence. A critical gap exists in the management of co-occurring pain and opioid dependence in Australia and multidisciplinary pain treatment approaches are needed for people with opioid dependence.

In this study, the research team will employ a two-stage research approach to firstly co-design and then test a non-pharmacological pain management program with consumers (i.e., individuals with chronic pain and opioid dependence) and service providers (i.e., drug treatment or pain management clinicians).

By developing and testing a complimentary suite of feasible, accessible, and effective nonpharmacological pain management approaches, this project aims to design an innovative pain management program for people with concurrent chronic pain and opioid dependence, which will translate into health benefits through improved pain treatment.

Funder: Medical Research Futures Fund (MRFF)

This project is a collaboration between Monash University, the Self Help Addiction Resource Centre, University of Sydney, Burnet Institute, Harm Reduction Victoria, cohealth, Turning Point, and South Eastern Sydney Local Health District Drug and Alcohol Services.

IMPLEMENTING COGNITIVE BIAS MODIFICATION DURING INPATIENT WITHDRAWAL TREATMENT TO PREVENT ALCOHOL RELAPSE

Investigators: **Prof Victoria Manning**, Prof Paul Haber, **Prof Dan Lubman**, Prof Patrick Olivier, Prof Adrian Dunlop, Prof Kirsten Morley, Prof Jessica Kasza, Prof Cathrine Mihalopoulos, Prof Malcolm Hopwood, **Dr Alex Waddell, Dr Ariel Roxburgh, A/Prof Shalini Arunogiri,** Dr Robert Lundin, Dr David Plevin, A/Prof Mark Daglish, Prof Reinout Wiers, Dr David Jacka, A/Prof David Pennington, **A/Prof Adam Searby**, Dr Mark Montebello

Of the ~20,000 Australians who undergo inpatient withdrawal treatment (IPWT) for alcohol use disorder annually, 85% relapse within a year, necessitating readmissions to this costly, intensive treatment, extending wait lists, and exacerbating the burden on hospital and addiction treatment services. Cognitive bias modification (CBM) is a neuroscience-informed computerised training intervention designed to reduce 'cognitive biases' that trigger urges to drink alcohol. Seven randomised controlled trials, including the research team's own NHMRC-funded RCT, have shown that adding CBM to treatment reduces relapse rates.

In a previous trial, the team found that CBM reduced relapse rates by 13-18% at 3-month follow-up, relative to controls. A personalised CBM smartphone app was also developed, and this significantly reduced alcohol use in outpatients in a recent RCT. Despite CBM being a brief (~10 minute per session), safe, highly acceptable, low-cost intervention, it is yet to be adopted in clinical practice. Current CBM programs are designed for use in RCTs, and thus, are complex and unsuitable for clinical implementation.

This project aims to bridge this evidence-implementation gap by co-designing, with clinicians and consumers, an online platform to facilitate routine CBM delivery during IPWT, and an implementation toolkit. In a staircase-cluster RCT, staff at 14 private & public IPW units across Australia will introduce CBM into their programs, offering all alcohol patients CBM during their admission, and providing access to a CBM app post-discharge to help extend its relapse prevention effects. The primary outcome is implementation success, assessed using the RE:AIM framework. This study will also examine the impact of implementation (relative to pre-implementation) on patients' alcohol use, health service costs, and quality of life. Drawing on clinician and patient insights, the implementation toolkit will be refined and a national dissemination and scale-up plan will be devised so that services across Australia can optimise patient outcomes.

Funders: NHMRC – Partnership Project Grant, Turning Point, Western Health, Monash Health, Uniting Limited, Albert Road Clinic, The Adelaide Clinic, Wyndam Clinic Private Hospital, Geelong Clinic, Mildura Base Public Hospital, The Melbourne Clinic, Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital, Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, Royal North Shore Hospital, Drug and Alcohol Nurses of Australasia, Self Help Addiction Resource Centre, HCF Research Foundation, Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association, Victorian Department of Health, Ramsay Hospital Research Foundation, Fiona Stanley Hospital

This project is a collaboration between Monash University, The University of Sydney, The University of Newcastle, and The University of Melbourne.

TRANSFORMING OPIOID DEPENDENCE THROUGH DATA-DRIVEN CO-DESIGN

Investigators: **Prof Suzanne Nielsen**, **Prof Dan Lubman**, Dr Hester Wilson, **Prof Dennis Petrie**, A/Prof Sarah Larney, A/Prof Geoffrey Spurling, **Dr Amanda Roxburgh**, Sione Crawford, **A/Prof Leah Heiss, Dr Ali Cheetham**

Opioid agonist treatments, including methadone and buprenorphine, are the gold standard for opioid dependence, with strong evidence supporting their clinical and cost-effectiveness. Despite this, treatment availability in Australia remains inadequate, with current capacity needing to double to meet demand. Challenges such as geographic disparities, prescriber shortages, and system inefficiencies limit access, particularly for key populations like those prescribed opioids for chronic pain. The healthcare burden of opioid dependence is significant, with high service utilisation and substantial costs, exacerbated by an ageing cohort of people receiving opioid dependence treatment and regional disparities in treatment availability.

Policy changes, including the listing of methadone and buprenorphine on the PBS, offer an opportunity to study how treatment is delivered across different state and leverage that understanding to make treatment more accessible, and better understand how different approaches to treatment delivery impact health outcomes. In parallel, prescriber numbers are declining, and innovative models of care—such as telehealth, expanded pharmacist and nurse practitioner roles, and integrated service hubs—are developing but lack rigorous evaluation to inform upscaling. This project will leverage national administrative data and emerging care models to inform more effective and sustainable treatment strategies.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this research will convene three expert panels (a consumer, stakeholder, and indigenous panel) to identify key research priorities, analyse national datasets to assess treatment accessibility and healthcare utilisation, and integrate findings from innovative pilot programs. Through stakeholder engagement and co-design, evidence-based models of care will be developed and refined, ensuring optimal resource utilisation and improved patient outcomes.

Funder: NHMRC

This project is a collaboration between Monash University, The University of NSW, Burnet Institute, and Harm Reduction Victoria.

UNDERSTANDING AND DISRUPTING ALCOHOL AVAILABILITY AS A PATHWAY TO ADDRESSING MENTAL ILL-HEALTH, INJURY AND HARM WITH ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS

Investigators: **Dr Bosco Rowland**, A/Prof Adrian Kelly, **Dr Rowan Ogeil**, Prof John Toumbourou, Dr Bianca Klettke, Dr Jacqueline Allen, **Dr Ting Xia, Prof Dan Lubman, Dr Ryan Baldwin**, Dr Julie Abimanyi-Ochom, Dr Jennifer Bailey, Dr Elizabeth Clancy, Rachel Smith, Leonardo Butterworth Banzhaf, Elle Handley

Adolescence is a high-risk time for the development of mental health and substance use disorders. Communities must be equipped with the tools and knowledge they need to counter the broadening that we are seeing in supply pathways and adolescents' access to alcohol. These strengthening access points include the rise of online ordering, rapid alcohol delivery services that often overlook age checks, and the increasing availability of zero or low-alcohol products – factors that may lead parents and guardians to soften boundaries around alcohol use.

This project will investigate the extent to which rising mental illness is linked with increasing alcohol access, before developing strategies to strengthen services and regulate alcohol supply. Ultimately, this study aims to reduce risky drinking among adolescents. By targeting these rapidly changing pathways to alcohol use, this project has the potential to improve the long-term mental and physical health outcomes of future generations.

Funder: MRFF

This project is a collaboration between Turning Point, Monash University, Queensland University of Technology, Deakin University, Griffith University, and the University of Washington.

COMPLETED RESEARCH

Below are some highlights showcasing the multidisciplinary addiction-related research completed by our members in 2025.

PRESCRIPTION OPIOID SAFETY TOOLKIT

Investigators: **Prof Suzanne Nielsen**, **Prof Paul Dietze**, Ms Monika Boogs, Mr Jarrod McMaugh, and **Dr Louisa Picco**

In Australia, opioid use is a leading cause of preventable injury, chronic disease, and death, causing over 1,000 deaths and costing AUD $15.7 billion annually. Harms extend beyond deaths to include non-fatal overdoses and dependence. Prescription opioids have driven most of this harm over recent decades. Despite this, people who are prescribed opioids have rarely been the focus of overdose prevention efforts. Evidence has also shown that healthcare providers are often reluctant to have conversations around opioid related risks. Knowing this, there is a need to improve health literacy about the role of opioids in chronic pain management and to empower consumers to discuss their use of opioids, including any concerns about safety with their prescribers and pharmacists. To address these gaps, this project aimed to:

- Co-design and pilot test a consumer resource, 'Opioid Safety Toolkit'
- Develop and implement a national communication and dissemination plan and evaluate the Opioid Safety Toolkit.

The Opioid Safety Toolkit was designed and developed over nine months using co-design processes. A total of seven two-hour workshops were conducted, three with healthcare professionals and four with consumers. Following this, user testing interviews were conducted with consumers who had not yet interacted with the Toolkit to test its usability.

The dissemination phase was undertaken in partnership with the national peak organisation representing consumers with pain (Painaustralia) and the national pharmacist peak body, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, to implement a national dissemination plan with national reach.

This project has addressed a considerable gap, creating a digital resource with tailored information for people prescribed opioids for pain. The Toolkit was created in consultation with consumers, ensuring the content, messaging, feel and flow are appropriate and meet the needs of this population. This is further highlighted by the Opioid Safety Toolkit being awarded a 2025 Good Design Award Gold Winner for public sector services (https://good-design.org/projects/prescription-opioid-safety-toolkit/), and was the winner of the 2025 Victorian Premier's Design Award, for service design (https://premiersdesignawards.vic.gov.au/entries/2025/service-design/prescription-opioid-safety-toolkit).

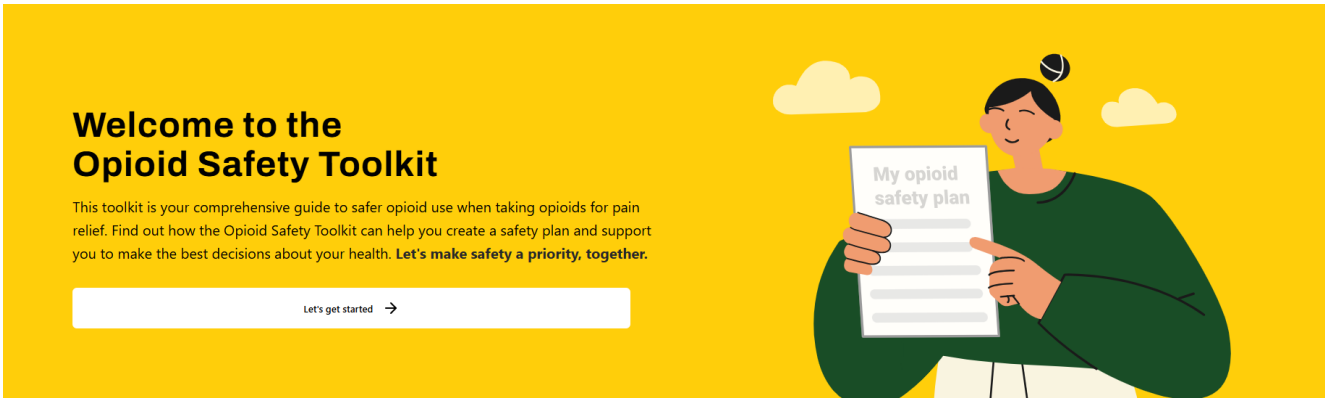
Extensive uptake among consumers (accessed over 125,000 times) demonstrates the need for such a resource, in addition to high satisfaction with the Toolkit. With approximately one-third of Australian pharmacies agreeing to promote the Toolkit, this further demonstrates widespread support for this resource. A broad range of other organisations have now embedded the Toolkit into their websites, including Healthdirect, Harm Reduction Australia, Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, Painaustralia and several Primary Health Networks (PHNs), providing additional evidence of the utility, need and acceptability of this consumer resource. Since the launch of the Toolkit in August 2024, there continues to be an increase in the supply and number of service providers providing naloxone.

Publications:

- Nielsen, S., Fox, F., Lam, T., Waddell, A., Jung, M., Rowland, B., Watterson, J., Basur, D., Prawira, C., Seguin, J. P., Olivier, P., McMaugh, J., Dietze, P., & Picco, L. (in press). The Opioid Safety Toolkit: An interactive prescription opioid safety toolkit to increase opioid safety literacy and behaviours among people prescribed opioids for pain—a randomised controlled trial. Addiction.
- Waddell A, Watterson JL, Basur D, Prawira CO, Picco L, Lam T, Olivier P, Seguin JP, Kay L, Nielsen S. An evidence based digital prescription opioid safety toolkit for national dissemination: co-design and user testing. Front Digit Health. 2025 Jul 11;7:1600836. doi: 10.3389/fdgth.2025.1600836.
- Wilson H, Picco L & Nielsen S. (2025) Reviewing long-term opioid use in patients experiencing chronic pain in General Practice: Activating patients and supporting clinical decision making. The Australian Journal of General Practice. Jul;54(7):453-458. doi: 10.31128/AJGP-06-24-7330.
- Dostal, J., Picco, L., & Nielsen, S. (2024). Advancing your practice: Opioid safety toolkit. AJP: The Australian Journal of Pharmacy, 105(1244), 68–73. https://ajp.com.au/cpd-activities/opioid-safety-toolkit/

Funder: Department of Health and Aged Care

This project was a collaboration between Monash University, the Burnet Institute, the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, and Painaustralia.



FIRST STEP EVALUATION

Investigators: **Dr Annette Peart, Prof Victoria Manning**

First Step delivers integrated, person-centred care for people with co-occurring substance use and mental health concerns, bringing together medical, mental health, substance use, and legal support in one service. A 20-month evaluation by Turning Point examined the model and its impact on clients.

A mixed-methods design was used, including client surveys (n=84), interviews with clients (n=24), staff (n=9), and stakeholders (n=12), and an outcomes co-design workshop. Interview findings highlighted meaningful client improvements across substance use, mental health, quality of life, relationships, and employment. Many clients reported reducing or ceasing substance use, while others stabilised use to manageable levels. Participants emphasised the value of First Step's holistic approach, with the service responding to a broad range of health and social needs. A welcoming, non-judgmental environment and strong, trusting relationships with skilled staff were central to client experiences and outcomes.

The outcomes workshop identified key priority areas, including health and emotional wellbeing, recovery, quality of life, and social stability. A pilot of baseline and three-month outcome measures showed early indications of positive change across these domains. Suggested areas for development included strengthening inclusion for LGBTQ+ individuals and women, and expanding peer-led and group activities to further support client connection and engagement.

Funder: First Step

EVIDENCE CHECK: SUPPORTING THE UPDATE OF THE NSW CLINICAL GUIDELINES FOR OPIOID DEPENDENCE TREATMENT (ODT)

Investigators: **Prof Suzanne Nielsen**, **Prof Peter Bragge**, **Dr Ali Cheetham**, Diki Tsering, Veronica Delafosse, **Dr Tina Lam**

The supervised administration of opioid dependence treatments such as methadone and buprenorphine remains a central feature of opioid dependence treatment models in Australia. Given significant changes in both clinical practice and the treatment landscape—particularly the expansion of long-acting injectable buprenorphine and increased attention to patient-centred care—a timely and systematic review of the evidence for supervised versus unsupervised dosing is warranted. The aim of this Evidence Check rapid review was to identify, appraise, and synthesise literature comparing supervised and unsupervised dosing of opioid dependence treatments with a focus on safety, effectiveness, retention, and treatment experience. The review was designed to prioritise evidence applicable to the Australian context and inform recommendations for the revision of clinical guidelines and support evidence-based decision-making regarding dosing supervision within NSW. A secondary aim was to identify best practice across recent (published since 2020) Australian and comparable international guidelines for opioid dependence treatment.

The evidence indicated that supervision requirements in pharmacotherapy treatment for opioid dependence can be most effective when increased take-aways are linked to indicators of patient stability and treatment progress, such as attendance, engagement, and substance use outcomes. Increased unsupervised dosing among patients who met stability criteria during the COVID-19 pandemic supports that increased flexibility can be offered without comprising safety or treatment outcomes. Take-away dosing and unsupervised induction with buprenorphine was found to achieve outcomes comparable to supervised dosing for safety, retention, and substance use, while improving patient satisfaction and quality of life. For methadone, outcomes appeared more sensitive to the degree of supervision, with better results observed when take-away dosing is linked to indicators of treatment progress. These findings support the importance of clinical assessment to determine the level of supervision required to maintain safety while maximising treatment flexibility, supporting patient autonomy, and strengthening the alignment of opioid dependence treatment with patient-centred practice.

Report: https://www.saxinstitute.org.au/wp-content/uploads/23-CAOD-20-Opioid-Dependence-Treatment-Final-Report-1.pdf

Funder: Sax Institute

This project was a collaboration between Monash Addiction Research Centre and BehaviourWorks Australia.

POLICY AND ENGAGEMENT

In 2025, the MARC policy team continued to advocate for people living with addiction, as well as their families and carers, through strategic engagement with state and federal governments and key stakeholders.

In May, the MARC symposium brought together leaders and experts in the AOD field for an engaging and informative panel discussion, asking them to reflect on how research can drive evidence-based policy and practice. The discussion highlighted the need for researchers to collaborate with governments, especially during budget planning, by pitching research as solutions to current challenges, and advocated for integrated data systems and public engagement, like podcasts, to drive evidence-based addiction policy.

In July, MARC made a joint submission with Turning Point to the Productivity Commission's interim report on the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement. The submission called for increased investment in AOD services that is strategic, nationally coordinated, and jointly supported under clear and accountable arrangements between the Commonwealth and state and territory governments. This could be achieved through a re-envisioning of the Agreement as the National Mental Health, AOD, and Suicide Prevention Agreement and committing to developing and investing in a dedicated AOD Schedule as part of that Agreement, supported by an investment uplift.

In October, MARC made a major submission to the Therapeutic Goods Administration's review of the safety and regulatory oversight of unapproved medicinal cannabis products. The submission included several evidence-based recommendations, including the need for a comprehensive evidence review to inform formal definitions of 'high' and 'very high' THC doses across dosage forms, to better support safe and effective clinical practice, as well as prohibiting typically non-medical, high THC extract concentrate dose forms (e.g., 'dabs', 'shatter' that contain 75–88% THC), and implementing a THC concentration limit ≤ the biological THC limit of the plant.

In November, MARC wrote to City of Melbourne councillors, urging them to consider the substantial body of evidence supporting the supervised injecting facility in the municipality, ahead of council deliberations regarding the potential withdrawal of support for such a service in the City of Melbourne. MARC has been a strong advocate for supervised injecting facilities and will continue to stand firmly behind overdose prevention services and the people who use them.

THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

MARC researchers were highly active in the thought leadership space this year, sharing their expertise and reinforcing their leadership in the field of addiction through workshops, written content, and other forms of scholarly and public engagement. Their contributions reflect a strong commitment to advancing knowledge, shaping discourse, and influencing practice. The examples below highlight a selection of MARC members' work in this area.

BEYOND OPIOIDS WORKSHOP

MARC, in collaboration with colleagues from the University of Sydney, hosted a workshop in September 2025 that brought together leading experts in the field and consumer representatives. The workshop focused on key learnings from opioid stewardship initiatives, as well as broader principles for the management of high-risk medicines.

The *Beyond Opioids* workshop aimed to identify critical evidence gaps to inform future research and support strategies to improve the quality use of high-risk medicines. Insights gathered during the workshop will inform the development of a set of priority evidence gaps and recommendations to guide future practice and research.

WHATEVER HAPPENS TO STAR, THE AGE OF UNFETTERED GAMBLING REVENUE FOR CASINOS MAY HAVE ENDED – THE CONVERSATION

A/Prof Charles Livingstone

In a piece for The Conversation, A/Prof Charles Livingstone discussed the financial pressure faced by Star casino and whether the age of unfettered gambling revenue for casinos may have come to and end, despite the booming gambling market.

MORE PEOPLE ARE TRYING MEDICINAL CANNABIS FOR CHRONIC PAIN. BUT DOES IT WORK? – THE CONVERSATION

Myfanwy Graham and Prof Suzanne Nielsen

MARC Deputy Director, Prof Suzanne Nielsen, and NHMRC Postgraduate Scholar Myfanwy Graham discussed the current evidence for the effectiveness of medicinal cannabis for chronic pain in this piece for The Conversation.

THIS 6-POINT PLAN CAN EASE AUSTRALIA'S GAMBLING PROBLEMS – IF OUR GOVERNMENT HAS THE GUTS – THE CONVERSATION

A/Prof Charles Livingstone

In a piece for The Conversation, A/Prof Charles Livingstone presented a six-point plan to reduce gambling harms.

HOW GEELONG BECAME AN UNEXPECTED FRONTLINE FOR GHB HARM – MONASH LENS

Dr Rowan Ogeil and Naomi Beard

In an article for Monash Lens, Dr Rowan Ogeil and Naomi Beard highlighted findings from their recent study, which identified the regional local government area of Greater Geelong as an unexpected hotspot for GHB-related harms. The piece explored the factors contributing to heightened vulnerability in regional communities and outlined potential strategies to address these emerging trends.

TACKLING DRINK AND DRUG DRIVING THROUGH CARE, NOT JUST PENALTIES – MONASH LENS

Dr Jasmin Grigg

In an article for Monash Lens, Dr Jasmin Grigg provided insight into the Driver Support Service, a health-led approach to drink or drug-driving, designed to complement existing law enforcement strategies. Developed by the Victorian Department of Transport and Planning, in collaboration with Turning Point, Eastern Health and Victoria Police, the program offers a telephone-delivered support service for individuals detected drink or drug-driving.

NEW DATA SHOWS A JUMP IN OLDER PEOPLE DYING FROM DRUG OVERDOSES – THE CONVERSATION

Prof Suzanne Nielsen and Dr Tina Lam

MARC Deputy Director, Prof Suzanne Nielsen, and Dr Tina Lam, MARC Program Lead, Alcohol Policy & Public Health Impact, discussed the significant jump in the number of older adults dying from an overdose, compared to two decades ago, and why this might be occurring in an article for The Conversation.

HEART ATTACK OR PANIC ATTACK? WHY YOUNG MEN ARE CALLING AMBULANCES FOR UNMANAGED ANXIETY – THE CONVERSATION

Prof Dan Lubman

MARC Director Prof Dan Lubman wrote a piece for The Conversation discussing research which used data from the National Ambulance Surveillance System to identify and describe the types of anxiety young men experience. One of the identified triggers of anxiety among young men was substance use.

MEDIA

In 2025, MARC researchers played a prominent role in the national media, providing authoritative commentary on public health, social policy, and harm prevention. The expert voices of the MARC membership were regularly sought by leading outlets including **ABC, SBS, The Guardian, The Age, Sydney Morning Herald, Reuters**, and commercial broadcast media, significantly extending the reach and impact of our membership's research.

Rising drug-related mortality and emerging threats were widely reported, including Associate Professor Dimitri Gerostamoulos' commentary on synthetic opioids in "Nitazene is quietly increasing opioid deaths" (*The Week*, November 2025) and Dr Amanda Roxburgh's contributions to coverage of escalating overdose deaths (e.g., "Prescription drug overdoses driving death toll", *ABC News*, July 2025). Professor Suzanne Nielsen's work featured regularly in evidence-based reporting on opioid policy and harm reduction, including "New opioid policies reduce ED visits" (*Pharmacy Daily*, August 2025) and investigative reporting on drug supply contamination (e.g., "Half a pill was enough to kill Jetson. Now this drug is infiltrating supply", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, March 2025).

Gambling-related harms received sustained media attention, with a large body of contributions by Associate Professor Charles Livingstone. This included national reporting on the scale of gambling losses in "Australians lose more money to gambling in a year than government spends on aged care, report finds" (*The Guardian*, March 2025) and critical analysis of industry narratives in "The 'responsible gambling' mantra does nothing to prevent harm. It probably makes things worse" (*ABC Radio* and *YourLifeChoices*, April 2025).

Media engagement also highlighted the unequal burden of harm borne by vulnerable populations. Examples included Professor Alex Collie's commentary on opioid use among injured workers ("Concerns over workers' comp opioid use", *Pharmacy Daily*, March 2025), Associate Professor Jennifer Schumann's expert analysis of coward punch fatalities ("Men in their 20s the most likely coward punch killers, study reveals", *The Herald Sun* and *Seven News*, May 2025; "'Totally ineffective': Why Victoria's coward punch laws are failing"; *The Herald Sun*), and Professors Philip Mendes and Susan Baidawi's research on the enduring impacts of childhood institutionalisation in aged care ("Understanding older care leavers' perceptions and experiences of aged care services", *Medical Xpress*, March 2025; "New study gives the aged care industry insights about enduring impact of childhood institutionalisation", *Phys.org*, December 2025).

Emerging and innovative treatment areas were covered with balance and caution. Professor Simon Bell and Dr Alene Yong contributed to coverage of Australia's first clinical practice guideline for psychedelic-assisted therapies ("New study to inform Australia's first psychedelics clinical guideline", *Medical Xpress*, March 2025, and "We changed the game allowing psychedelics to treat mental illness", *Monash News*, March 2025). Medicinal cannabis was also examined through evidence-focused reporting led by Professor Suzanne Nielsen and Myfanwy Graham (e.g., "Chronic Pain Relief: Examining The Role Of Medicinal Cannabis", *ABC Radio*; "As medicinal cannabis prescriptions climb, does the evidence hold up?", *Australian Pharmacist*; May–August 2025).

Overall, media engagement in 2025 reinforced MARC researchers' standing as trusted national experts, translating complex evidence into accessible public commentary and contributing directly to policy debate, regulatory scrutiny, and community understanding on issues of significant social impact.

A list of MARC media highlights, including the most widely publicised and syndicated articles in 2025, can be found on our website.

OUR COLLABORATORS

MARC members collaborate with a diverse range of local, national, and international research and clinical partners. The collaborators listed below represent some of our key partnerships with research organisations, health services, and community associations.

Alfred Health

Ambulance Victoria

Area 4 Pharmacotherapy Network

Association of Participating Service Users

Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League

Australian Institute of Family Studies

Australian National University

Australian Research Council

Barwon Health

Beyond Blue

Bouverie Centre

Burnet Institute

Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy

Cancer Council Victoria

Chisholm TAFE

cohealth

Deakin University

Department of Health and Human Services, Victoria

Department of Health, Commonwealth

Eastern Health

Eastern Health Foundation

Eastern Melbourne PHN

Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE)

Harm Reduction Victoria

La Trobe University

Monash Health

Murrumbidgee Local Health District

National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA), Flinders University

National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC), University of New South Wales

National Drug Research Institute (NDRI), Curtin University

Nurses and Midwives Health Program Victoria

Peer Based Harm Reduction WA

Penington Institute

Peninsula Health

Self Help Addiction Resource Centre (SHARC)

South Eastern Sydney Local Health District

Leeds Trinity University, UK

St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne

Turning Point

University of Melbourne

University of Newcastle

University of NSW

University of Oregon, USA

University of Queensland

University of Sydney

University of Tasmania

University of Wollongong

VicHealth

Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA)

Victorian Responsible Gambling Foundation

Windana

Western health

World Health Organisation

Youth Support + Advocacy Service (YSAS)

PUBLICATIONS

In 2025, MARC researchers published 261 addiction-related peer-reviewed articles. Publications appeared in high-impact international journals, including *The Lancet Public Health, JAMA Psychiatry, Addiction, Medical Journal of Australia, Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews, and Nature Medicine*. Overall, 78% of papers were published in Q1 journals.

Published studies on alcohol and other drug use spanned the full continuum from prevention to treatment and recovery. Major themes included opioid prescribing, deprescribing and stewardship (e.g., Early High-Risk Opioid Prescribing and Persistent Opioid Use in Australian Workers with Workers' Compensation Claims for Back and Neck Musculoskeletal Disorders or Injuries: A Retrospective Cohort Study); overdose prevention measures such as naloxone (e.g., Naloxone dosing in the era of synthetic opioids: Applying the Goldilocks principle); and the effectiveness of harm-reduction interventions, including supervised injecting services and drug checking (e.g., Differences in heroin overdose risk associated with the unregulated drug market: Insights from a supervised injecting facility in Melbourne, Australia). A significant focus was placed on emerging drug threats, including synthetic opioids, counterfeit pharmaceuticals, novel benzodiazepines, and illicit adulterants (e.g., Psychoactive Synthetic Adulterants in Tablets Sold as MDMA after the COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications for Central Effects), with studies drawing heavily on ambulance, emergency department, and toxicosurveillance data.

Studies also examined treatment systems and models of care (e.g., 'It's Hard to Look Past the Accessibility': Service Provider Perspectives on Implementing Telehealth for Alcohol and Other Drug Counselling as a Health Service Innovation; Co-design of digital public health substance use resources: A collaboration between young people and experts). These studies examined barriers to engagement, treatment retention, service integration, and workforce capacity, especially for people with complex needs such as co-occurring mental health conditions, justice involvement, chronic pain, or trauma.

Research into gambling and related harm formed an important stream, examining behavioural, psychological, and financial aspects. Studies explored risk profiles, underlying emotional and cognitive processes, the effectiveness of digital interventions, and broader social and economic impacts (e.g., GamblingLess: In-The-Moment: a mixed-methods acceptability and engagement evaluation of a gambling just-in-time adaptive intervention; A review of Returned and Services League venues operating electronic gambling machines in Victoria, Australia and the level of funding contributed to veterans).

Among the publications was consistent attention to the social determinants of addiction-related harm, including poverty, housing instability, policing, incarceration, workplace injury, gender, and cultural marginalisation. Many studies centred on people who are often underrepresented in research yet overrepresented in harm statistics, including people who inject drugs, people in custody, older adults, young people, healthcare workers, and regional communities (e.g., Opioid-related harms and experiences of care among people in justice settings in New South Wales, Australia: evidence from the National Ambulance Surveillance System; Cognitive performance in young adults who endorse a cannabis use disorder).

Overall, the 2025 publication portfolio of MARC members demonstrates a cohesive, policy-relevant program of work that treats gambling, alcohol, and other drug use not just as isolated behaviours, but as deeply embedded within health systems, social structures, and regulatory environments. The research provides robust evidence to guide prevention, treatment, harm reduction and reform, with a clear focus on reducing avoidable harm and improving outcomes for individuals, families, and communities.

A full list of publications for 2025 can be found on our website.

MONASH University

FURTHER INFORMATION

Any enquiries or comments regarding this publication including requests regarding use or reproduction should be directed to the Monash Addiction Research Centre

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