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### Drug related deaths - a wider view is necessary

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## **Letter to the editor – Addiction**

### **Drug related deaths - a wider view is necessary**

Dear Sir,

The paper from Stam et. al. (1) and the insightful commentary from Darke (2) resonate with the concerns of others in Europe, the UK and, in particular, Scotland where drug-related deaths continue to be disproportionately high per head of population (3).

Definitions, which vary across jurisdictions, lead to difficulties comparing datasets (4). In addition, there are problems in ascertaining information, including contextual, pertaining to the death (as provided by police, physician, pathologist and/or coroner) and its subsequent assimilation by those coding cause of death. Attempts to standardise and coordinate toxicology and pathological findings across Scotland have helped accuracy.

As Darke suggests, there are additional reasons why deaths due to drugs are under estimated. We would highlight an increasing interest in the problems for older people who continue to use or have used drugs in the past. Examination of the health of this group reveals additional insights (5). Late deaths due to end stage liver disease and hepatocellular carcinoma linked to hepatitis C virus or alcohol-related remain a significant cause of mortality in older people who have used drugs (6). Other deaths contributing to older users' high burden of disease include early lung cancer and respiratory disease in heavy smokers, cardiovascular deaths, violence, trauma, suicide and co-dependency with alcohol.

Record linkage studies and cohort data should be utilised to identify the true impact of drug use and a more realistic assessment of the impact of drug use over time is urgently required (7,8). This might concentrate attention on the importance of early intervention in treatments and screening.

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2. Darke, S. Commentary on Stam et al. (2019): Drugs, death and statistics *Addiction*, 114, 513–514
3. National Records of Scotland (NRS) Drug-related Deaths in Scotland in 2017 [WWW Document] URL (2018)

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5. Lu Gao J.Roy Robertson Sheila M.Bird Non drug-related and opioid-specific causes of 3262 deaths in Scotland's methadone-prescription clients, 2009–2015  
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6. Hepatitis C in the United Kingdom 2018 Report. Public Health England  
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7. Public Health England. Office for National Statistics. Drug-related deaths "deep dive" into coroners' records 2018. An experimental "deep dive" study investigating deaths related to drug misuse in 2014 and 2015 using available coroners' records.

8. The National Drug Related deaths Report 2018. NHS National Services, Scotland  
<https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Drugs-and-Alcohol-Misuse/Publications/2018-06-12/2018-06-12-NDRDD-Report.pdf>

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