Buprenorphine abuse in Singapore

Yao Yi Ju, Ph.D., Head, Toxicology Laboratory, Centre for Forensic Science, Applied Sciences Group, Health Sciences Authority

This presentation aims to give the reader an overview of buprenorphine abuse in Singapore.

Subutex (or buprenorphine hydrochloride) was marketed in Singapore for the treatment of opiate-dependence in 2002. When used sublingually as indicated, there are evidences that buprenorphine is effective in preventing opiate withdrawal symptoms and maintaining abstinence. However, many drug addicts were found abusing Subutex by mixing it with benzodiazepines, mainly Dormicum (midazolam), and injecting the cocktail into their bodies. This was evident from the exhibits that were submitted to our Narcotics I Laboratory for analysis.

The first case of a buprenorphine-related death was detected in September 2003. This was a sudden death of a 35-year old drug abuser, with a hypodermic syringe at the side of the body. The syringe was later found to contain buprenorphine. Diazepam was also detected in the blood specimen of the deceased.

During the period 2003 to 2006, both the Centre for Forensic Science and Centre for Forensic Medicine saw an increase in buprenorphine abuse and buprenorphine-related deaths. This led to tighter control over Subutex prescriptions. It was eventually declared a Class A Controlled Drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act on 14 Aug 2006.