



20. Finding a GP

Everyone needs a doctor. But finding one who meets your needs and who you get on with isn't always easy. As a client of the Auckland Opioid Treatment Service (AOTS) there is an expectation that you will have a GP, not only because most clients will eventually move into Shared Care but because the doctors at AOTS are unable to deal with every client's individual health needs. So here are some ideas and things to consider.

Things to consider when finding a GP

- In order to keep your costs down and to ensure your health issues are treated holistically, it's recommended that you have only one GP, rather than visiting different doctors for different things. (See Enrolling with a GP and The associated costs over the page.)
- You may want to find a doctor close to where you live or it might be more convenient to choose one close to your work. For many people, a doctor's gender and/or ethnicity may be important.
- The best way to find a good doctor is by word-of-mouth: talk with your neighbours, AOTS key worker, family, friends or people you trust; ask other people what they think of their doctors and remember, you don't have to tell anyone the reason you're looking for a doctor.
- Talk to other AOTS clients. You want to find a doctor who has a sound reputation as caring, competent and non-judgmental, someone who is open to working with opioid substitution. There's no point going to a doctor who doesn't agree with OST and who thinks negatively about AOTS clients.
- One of the tricky things about listening to other people's opinions of their doctors is that it's so subjective: some people like a doctor who has a no-nonsense approach whereas other people will find that manner confrontational and abrasive. What works for one person won't necessarily work for another. That's why it's a good idea to talk to several people.
- You might already have a regular doctor you want to continue seeing. Your doctor will need to be authorised by AOTS to prescribe opioid substitution. (This is a Ministry of Health requirement.) If you're not comfortable with your regular doctor prescribing opioid substitution meds for you, then you will need to find a new doctor to handle your OST prescribing and other health issues.
- *'I already have a doctor but have been told they don't do methadone'*. Don't be put off by hearing this if you like your doctor and want them to handle your prescribing; AOTS will look into it with you. However, if AOTS finds that your doctor isn't keen on supporting your opioid substitution treatment then you need to find one who will.
- If you choose to have one doctor for your OST and another one for your other health needs, then this is going to cost you more. You only get subsidised for the Practice with which you're enrolled.

The practicalities of finding a doctor

The front section of the White Pages lists doctors by area under Registered Medical Practitioners & Medical Centres. You can ask your key worker plus there are numerous websites which list doctors, including:

- www.procare.co.nz where you can search for a doctor by location. Procare lists about 500 doctors in the Auckland region and some of them may offer Careplus subsidised rates.
- www.everybody.co.nz you can search for a doctor by clicking on the "Find a Health Professional" tab. On this site you can search by area and the GP's interests. Enter 'Auckland' and 'Addictions' in the search and over 50 GPs are listed.

Also available:

1. Opioid treatment with AOTS
2. Facts about methadone
3. First methadone dose and stabilisation
4. Accidental overdose
5. Ongoing Opioid Substitution Treatment (OST)
6. Indicators of stability
7. Clinical tests: blood, urine, etc.
8. Restabilisation
9. Pharmacy dispensing
10. Changes to prescriptions
11. Holiday arrangements within NZ
12. Travelling overseas
13. Methadone takeaways
14. Shared Care with your GP
15. Thinking about coming off?
16. Involuntarily withdrawal
17. Pregnancy and opioid treatment
18. Methadone and medication interactions
19. Driving and OST
20. Finding a GP

Facts about buprenorphine (Suboxone®)

Suboxone® treatment with CADS

- www.healthpages.co.nz another good website for a GP search.

Once you've identified a doctor you'd like to see, call their practice and ask if that doctor is taking on patients. If they are, you can ask to speak to the GP's nurse: say that you are on OST with AOTS and ask whether this complicates issues. This way you can avoid paying for an appointment that may not work out. Or, when you go to enrol, you can add 'opioid substitution treatment' to the 'medications info' section of the enrolment form to open the opportunity to talk about OST with the GP.

If finding a suitable GP is proving difficult ask your AOTS key worker to help you; for example, they may know of supportive GPs in the area and may accompany you to your first appointment.

Enrolling with a GP practice

It's important that you are enrolled with a GP practice well before AOTS organises your GP to prescribe your OST.

To enrol you complete an enrolment form at a GP Practice of your choice. You can enrol with only one GP Practice. You can attend another practice as a casual patient but you'll pay a higher fee for that visit. Being enrolled and attending one practice keeps your costs down: the fee you pay to your doctor and any prescription fees will be cheaper than if you aren't enrolled, and you'll have access to many free health services in your community. (PS. It's free to enrol.)

The associated costs

"The clinic didn't make me pay for appointments but it's far away. I have a doctor not far from home so it all balances out I guess." Some AOTS clients have expressed concerns about the cost of regular GP visits. However there are hidden savings in visiting a GP rather than AOTS:

- By choosing a GP in a convenient location you will save on travel costs;
- Most GPs have longer and more flexible hours than AOTS, so a visit to the GP may be less disruptive to work schedules etc.

In Shared Care you need to see the GP every three months (though this varies though between doctors and can depend on individual circumstances). You need to collect a new script on two occasions between those appointments as scripts can only be written monthly for controlled drugs. (NZ Practice Guidelines 2008 p.19)

At your first appointment with a doctor you need to talk about the associated costs. Ask if you can receive Careplus which is a government funding scheme for patients who make frequent visits to the GP. Some doctors like to see their OST patients each month and may offer reduced fees as a result so it's important you get this sorted as soon as you can.

Prices for visits vary from GP to GP: face to face appointments can be anything from \$10 - \$56; the

average seems to be about \$30. Arranging to pick up a new script (which can be done over the phone) is normally \$7 - \$14. If cost is going to make a difference you need to ring around to find out what doctors in your area are charging for a consultation.

Managing the cost is something you can talk to your AOTS key worker and doctor about. To avoid financial difficulties it might be a good idea to set up weekly automatic payment to the doctor. This approach has worked well for many AOTS clients already in Shared Care.

Two main reasons for Shared Care

1. To support the recovery journey of people undergoing opioid substitution treatment. The shift away from a specialist service to Shared Care is a step that represents a move toward independence from drug and alcohol treatment services and a normalizing of OST.
2. The increasing emphasis from the Ministry of Health on the role of primary health care (GPs, practice nurses etc.) in the treatment of all New Zealander's health issues. For more information see Information Sheet 15 *Shared Care with your GP*.

What's in it for me?

Better health, the convenience of less travel and more flexibility, having drug dependence treated as a medical condition, having/ developing a good relationship with the GP, seeing one person for all your healthcare needs, feeling more responsible for your own treatment, feeling less stigma and more 'normal' attending a GP surgery than a specialist service, greater privacy and confidentiality - these are just some of the things many people mentioned when asked about their experience of having their OST managed by a GP.¹

"The years spent attending the clinic were very helpful. There was always excellent support for me but now it feels like I've moved on; I'm like a person with any other medical problem like diabetes for instance, who needs medication each day. And having to see my GP each month for my script gives me the opportunity to get other health issues dealt with. I wouldn't go to the GP very often usually but now I've got my Hep C and other stuff sorted. It's a one-stop shop for me with no stigma attached. I just get on with life'.

¹ Methadone Maintenance Treatment: Barriers to, and incentives for, the transfer of opioid-dependent people from secondary care to primary health care (PDF, 653kb) www.mhc.govt.nz/users/Image/Resources/2005