Punjab’s Opioid Crisis

What is the issue?

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- Punjab is one of the hotbeds of drug abuse in India, has a worsening Opioid crisis.
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- Punjab state government has taken various measures to enhance Opioid Substitution Therapy (OST).
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What are Opioids?

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- Opioids are a class of drugs that include the illegal drug heroin, synthetic opioids such as fentanyl, and pain relievers available legally by prescription.
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- These drugs are chemically related and interact with opioid receptors on nerve cells in the body and brain.
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- Opioid pain relievers are generally safe when taken for a short time and as prescribed by a doctor.
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- As they produce euphoria in addition to pain relief they can be misused, when misused opioid pain relievers can lead to overdose incidents and deaths.
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What measures were taken by Punjab to counter drug abuse?

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- It is estimated that Punjab has between 1.7 lakh and 2.7 lakh addicts.
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- State government has promised to end the drug menace, through policing and by medical interventions.
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- State government on pilot basis had introduced Buprenorphine-based Outpatient Opioid Assisted Treatment (OOAT) programme.
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- Buprenorphine is currently administered in four rehabilitation and 21 community health centres in the state.
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- As of mid-January 2018, 1,712 new patients were registered in the three districts where the pilot is running, the patient retention rate currently stands at 82.13%.
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What is the role of Buprenorphine in OST?

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- Opioid substitution therapy (OST) is the proper procedure for the treatment endorsed by WHO, Buprenorphine is one of the OST drug given on a long-term basis.
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- The treatment involves doctor-administered doses of Buprenorphine under controlled circumstances.
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- The drug can play a major role in rehabilitating addicts if used under medical supervision along with psychosocial interventions.
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- In India Buprenorphine is a Schedule H drug and is available at government-recognised pharmacies only.
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What are the Risks involved with Buprenorphine?

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- Patients may get addicted to Buprenorphine, and start consuming it in non-medical environments.
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- If injected along with depressant drugs, this can even lead to death.
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- In Punjab there was a boom in the demand for Buprenorphine as addicts found the drug to be an alternative.
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- Private psychiatrists had started prescribing the drug in excessive quantity to addicts, and it was being sold as an alternative to heroin.
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What measures were taken to address misuse of OST drugs?

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- Punjab government had ordered a high-profile crackdown on drug peddlers by placing restrictions on Buprenorphine.
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- The government issued orders to restrict its supply after there were reports of misuse and illegal sale.
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- Its availability was restricted to government and private rehabilitation centres only.
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- Buprenorphine is sold under strict regulations and cannot be purchased without the prescription of a qualified doctor.
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- It is also listed as a psychotropic substance under The Narcotic Drugs Psychotropic Substances Act.
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Source: Indian Express

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