The Effect of Opioids on Emotional Reactivity

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.......................................................................................................................... xi
Declaration ...................................................................................................................... xiii
Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................... xiv

CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION ................................................................................. 1

1.1 OPIOIDS AND OPIOID MAINTENANCE TREATMENT.............................. 1
  1.1.1 A BRIEF HISTORY OF OPIOIDS......................................................... 1
  1.1.2 OPIOID RECEPTORS ............................................................................ 1
  1.1.3 ADAPTATION TO OPIOIDS ............................................................... 3
    1.1.3.1 Tolerance ......................................................................................... 4
    1.1.3.2 Withdrawal ..................................................................................... 4
    1.1.3.3 Dependence and Addiction .............................................................. 5
  1.1.4 OPIOID MAINTENANCE TREATMENT ............................................. 6
    1.1.4.1 METHADONE ................................................................................ 6
    Pharmacological profile of methadone ............................................................ 7
    Pharmacokinetics of Methadone ................................................................. 7
    Pharmacodynamics of methadone ............................................................. 8
  1.1.4.2 METHADONE MAINTENANCE TREATMENT ................................ 9
  1.1.4.3 BUPRENORPHINE .......................................................................... 9
    Pharmacological profile of buprenorphine .................................................. 10
    Pharmacokinetics of buprenorphine ......................................................... 10
    Pharmacodynamics of buprenorphine ...................................................... 11
  1.1.4.4 BUPRENORPHINE MAINTENANCE TREATMENT ....................... 12

1.2 OPIOIDS AND EMOTION .............................................................................. 13
  1.2.1 BACKGROUND .................................................................................. 13
  1.2.2 AFFECT .............................................................................................. 14
  1.2.3 MOOD ................................................................................................... 14
  1.2.4 EMOTION ............................................................................................. 15
  1.2.5 EUPHORIA .......................................................................................... 16
    1.2.5.1 Mesolimbic dopamine system .......................................................... 17
  1.2.6 EMOTIONAL PROCESSING ................................................................. 17
    1.2.6.1 Emotion and emotional reactivity .................................................... 17
  1.2.7 DRUG EFFECTS ON EMOTIONAL SYSTEMS ................................ 19
1.2.7.1 Opioid effects on emotions ................................................................. 19
1.2.7.2 Opioid effects on euphoria ................................................................. 22
1.2.7.3 Modification of affective disorders by opioids ................................. 24
1.2.7.4 Summary of Opioid effects on emotions ........................................... 25

1.2.8 CHALLENGES IN RESEARCHING EMOTION AND MOOD .................. 26
1.2.8.1 Mood Induction Procedures .............................................................. 27
1.2.8.2 Measuring the effect on affective systems ........................................ 28

1.3 OPIOIDS AND PAIN ................................................................................. 29
1.3.1 PAIN ........................................................................................................ 29
1.3.2 OPIOID RECEPTORS AND ANALGESIA ......................................... 31
1.3.3 OPIOID INDUCED HYPERALGESIA ................................................. 32
1.3.4 PAIN AND EMOTIONAL STATES ......................................................... 34
1.3.5 COMMON PATHWAYS IN PAIN AND MOOD ................................... 36

1.4 SUMMARY ................................................................................................. 36

CHAPTER 2 - GENERAL METHODS AND PROCEDURES ................................. 38

2.1 GENERAL AIMS AND HYPOTHESES ..................................................... 38
2.2 GENERAL METHODS .............................................................................. 40
2.2.1 Ethics ...................................................................................................... 40
2.2.2 Recruitment ............................................................................................. 40
2.2.3 Screening .................................................................................................. 41
2.2.4 Payment .................................................................................................... 41
2.3 GENERAL MATERIALS ............................................................................ 42
2.3.1 Scales ....................................................................................................... 42
2.3.1.1 Demographic and background information ........................................ 42
2.3.1.2 Visual Analogue Scales (VAS-D and VAS-E) ........................................ 42
2.3.1.3 Profile of Mood States (POMS) ........................................................... 43
2.3.1.4 Subjective Opiate Withdrawal Scale (SOWS) ....................................... 43
2.3.1.5 Beck’s Depression Inventory (BDI) ....................................................... 43
2.3.1.6 State-Trait Anxiety Inventory (STAI-R) ............................................... 44
2.3.1.7 State-Trait Anger Inventory (STAIX-R) ............................................... 44
2.3.1.8 Hassles and Uplifts Scale (HSUPS) ....................................................... 45
2.3.2 Stimuli .................................................................................................... 45
2.3.2.1 Velten’s Mood Induction Procedure (MIP) ......................................... 45
2.3.2.2 Cold Pressor Pain Procedure .............................................................. 47
2.3.2.3 Plasma Opioid Concentrations

CHAPTER 3 – STUDY 1 PROCEDURE AND RESULTS – METHADONE AND COLD PAIN SENSITIVITY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

3.2 AIM & HYPOTHESIS

3.3 METHOD

3.3.1 Subjects

3.3.2 Screening

3.3.3 Procedure

3.4 RESULTS

3.4.1 Statistical Analyses

3.4.2 Subject Characteristics

3.4.2.1 Demographics

3.4.2.2 Plasma Methadone Concentrations

3.4.3 Cold Pain Sensitivity

3.4.3.1 Cold Pain Threshold

3.4.3.2 Cold Pain Tolerance

3.4.3.3 Correlation between Cold Pain Sensitivity and Methadone Concentration

3.4.4 Correlations between higher order psychological functions and pain sensitivity

3.5 DISCUSSION

3.6 CONCLUSION

CHAPTER 4 – STUDY 1 RESULTS – METHADONE AND DEPRESSION REACTIVITY (PRIMARY MEASURES)
CHAPTER 5 – STUDY 1 RESULTS – METHADONE AND DEPRESSION
EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY (SECONDARY MEASURES) ...........................................92

5.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................92
5.2 AIM AND HYPOTHESES ..................................................................................94
5.3 RESULTS ...........................................................................................................94
  5.3.1 Statistical Analyses ......................................................................................94
  5.3.2 Depression Reactivity measured by POMS (secondary measures) ............95
  5.3.2.1 Evaluating MIPD measured by POMS-D ..............................................95
    Spaghetti Plots ..................................................................................................95
    Mean Time Plots ...............................................................................................96
  5.3.2.2 Depression Reactivity measured by Change in POMS-D ......................97
  5.3.2.3 Evaluating MIPD measured by POMS-TMD .........................................99
    Spaghetti Plots ..................................................................................................99
    Mean Time Plots ...............................................................................................100
  5.3.2.4 Depression Reactivity measured by Change in POMS-TMD ...............101
5.4 DISCUSSION .....................................................................................................103
5.5 CONCLUSION ....................................................................................................105

CHAPTER 6 – STUDY 1 RESULTS – METHADONE AND ELATION
REACTIVITY (PRIMARY MEASURES) ......................................................................106

6.1 INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................106
6.2 AIM AND HYPOTHESIS ..................................................................................108
6.3 RESULTS ...........................................................................................................108
  6.3.1 Statistical Analyses ......................................................................................108
  6.3.2 Elation Reactivity measured by VAS-E (primary measure) .....................108
  6.3.2.1 Evaluating MIPE measured by VAS-E ...............................................109
    Spaghetti Plots ................................................................................................109
    Mean Time Plots .............................................................................................110

6.3.2.2 Effectiveness of MIPE measured by VAS-E ............................................................... 111
6.3.2.3 Elation Reactivity measured by Change in VAS-E ..................................................... 112
6.3.2.4 Correlations between Elation Reactivity and Methadone ........................................ 115

6.4 DISCUSSION .................................................................................................................. 116
6.5 CONCLUSION ................................................................................................................ 118
6.6 GENERAL LIMITATIONS OF STUDY 1 ..................................................................... 118
6.7 GENERAL CONCLUSION OF STUDY 1 ..................................................................... 119

CHAPTER 7 – STUDY 2– OPIOIDS AND EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY
(PRIMARY AND SECONDARY MEASURES) ........................................................................ 122

7.1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 122
7.2 AIM AND HYPOTHESES ............................................................................................. 124
7.3 METHOD ....................................................................................................................... 125
   7.3.1 Subjects .................................................................................................................. 125
   7.3.2 Exclusions and non-completions ............................................................................. 125
   7.3.3 Materials ............................................................................................................... 126
   7.3.4 Procedure .............................................................................................................. 127
7.4 RESULTS ....................................................................................................................... 128
   7.4.1.1 Statistical Analysis ............................................................................................. 128
   7.4.1.2 Subject Characteristics / Demographics .............................................................. 128
   7.4.1.3 Plasma methadone concentrations in the Opioid Maintenance Treatment
   Groups ........................................................................................................................... 130
   Relationship between dose, R- methadone and S-methadone and buprenorphine. 130
   7.4.1.4 Emotional Reactivity – Primary Measures (VAS) .................................................. 131
   Spaghetti Plots for Depression Reactivity ....................................................................... 131
   Spaghetti Plots for Elation Reactivity .............................................................................. 132
   7.4.1.5 Mean Time Plots for Depression and Elation Reactivity ....................................... 133
   7.4.1.6 Effectiveness of mood induction procedure measured by VAS ......................... 135
   7.4.1.7 Effects of methadone and buprenorphine on Emotional Reactivity – Primary
   Measures (VAS) ............................................................................................................ 137
   7.4.1.8 Correlation between Elation and Depression Reactivity and Opioid Dose 139
   7.4.1.9 Emotional reactivity – Secondary Measures (POMS) ........................................... 140
   7.4.1.10 Evaluating MIPD measured by POMS-D ............................................................ 140
   Spaghetti Plots ............................................................................................................. 140
   Mean Time Plots .......................................................................................................... 141

7.4.1.11 Effects of methadone and buprenorphine on Emotional Reactivity – Secondary Measures (POM-Depression) ................................................................. 142
7.4.1.12 Evaluating MIPD measured by POMS-TMD .................................................. 143
    Spaghetti Plots ........................................................................................................ 143
    Mean Time Plots ...................................................................................................... 144
7.4.1.13 Effects of methadone and buprenorphine on Emotional Reactivity – Secondary Measures (POM-Total Mood Disturbance) ........................................... 145
7.5 DISCUSSION ............................................................................................................. 146
    7.5.1 LIMITATIONS .................................................................................................... 148
7.6 CONCLUSION ........................................................................................................... 148

CHAPTER 8 - OVERALL DISCUSSION OF BOTH STUDIES AND OVERVIEW
.................................................................................................................................. 150
8.1 REVISITING BRIEFLY THE RATIONALE FOR THE THESIS ................................. 150
8.2 SUMMARY OF MAJOR FINDINGS ......................................................................... 151
8.3 IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS ...................................................................... 152
    8.3.1 Emotional Reactivity and Psychopathology ...................................................... 153
    8.3.2 Long term effects of impairing emotion response systems ............................. 155
    8.3.3 Other implications in opioid maintenance treatment ....................................... 156
    8.3.4 IMPLICATIONS FROM OTHER FINDINGS IN THIS THESIS ...................... 156
8.4 LIMITATIONS .......................................................................................................... 157
8.5 FUTURE RESEARCH ............................................................................................. 158
8.6 CONCLUSION .......................................................................................................... 159

BIBLIOGRAPHY ............................................................................................................. 160

APPENDIX A. INSTRUCTIONS FOR VELTEN'S INDUCTION PROCEDURES .... 193
APPENDIX B. VELTEN'S INDUCTION PROCEDURE - ELATION CARD SET ...... 195
APPENDIX C. VELTEN'S INDUCTION PROCEDURE - NEUTRAL CARD SET .... 200
APPENDIX D. VELTEN'S INDUCTION PROCEDURE - DEPRESSION CARD SET 204
TABLE OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Plasma methadone concentrations over a 24 hour period</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Concept of Emotion</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>POMS-Depression score during a 24-hour inter-dosing interval</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>POMS total mood disturbance score during a 24-hour inter-dosing interval</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pain Pathways</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Cold pressor pain tolerance for methadone patients and controls</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Velten’s Mood Induction Procedures</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Cold pressor pain procedure</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Plasma methadone concentrations</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cold pain threshold</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Scatterplot for change in plasma R(-) methadone concentration versus change in cold pain threshold</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Scatterplot for change in plasma R(-) methadone concentration versus change in cold pain tolerance</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Scatterplot for change in plasma R(-) methadone concentration versus change in cold pain pain tolerance</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (All)</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Controls (All)</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone group (All)</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Controls (All)</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (Minimal to mild group only)</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Controls. Minimal-mild group only</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone (Minimal-Mild only)</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Controls (Minimal-Mild only)</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (Moderate to severe group only)</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone (Mod-Severe only)</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Study 1 procedure flow chart</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHICS AND CLINICAL DATA FOR THE METHADONE GROUP AND CONTROLS | 55 |

TABLE 2: Correlations: Methadone dose and changes in plasma methadone concentrations | 57 |

TABLE 3: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures | 61 |

TABLE 4: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (Minimal to mild group only) | 66 |

TABLE 5: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Controls (Minimal to mild group only) | 67 |

TABLE 6: Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone group (Minimal-Mild group only) | 69 |

TABLE 7: Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Controls (Minimal-Mild group only) | 70 |

TABLE 8: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (Moderate to severe group only) | 71 |

TABLE 9: Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone (Mod-Severe only) | 72 |

TABLE 10: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (Minimal to mild group only) | 73 |

TABLE 11: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Controls (Minimal to mild group only) | 74 |

TABLE 12: Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone (Mod-Severe only) | 75 |

TABLE 13: Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone (Mod-Severe only) | 76 |

TABLE 14: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (Minimal to mild group only) | 77 |

TABLE 15: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Controls (Minimal to mild group only) | 78 |

TABLE 16: Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone (Mod-Severe only) | 79 |

TABLE 17: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Methadone group (Minimal to mild group only) | 80 |

TABLE 18: Correlation matrix: Psychological measures, Controls (Minimal to mild group only) | 81 |

TABLE 19: Correlation matrix: Cold pain sensitivity and psychological measures, Methadone (Mod-Severe only) | 82 |
FIGURE 37: EMOTIONAL STATE SCORES FOR DEPRESSION .................................................................137
FIGURE 38: CHANGE IN ELLATION SCORES (ELATION REACTIVITY) ........................................138
FIGURE 39: CHANGE IN DEPRESSION SCORES (DEPRESSION REACTIVITY) ...............................139
TABLE 22: CORRELATIONS: OPIOID DOSE VS EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY. ZERO-ORDER CORRELATIONS
AND PARTIAL CORRELATIONS CORRECTED FOR BDI ..............................................................140
FIGURE 40: SPAGHETTI PLOTS OF DEPRESSION SCORE (POMS-D) PRE AND POST DEPRESSION
INDUCTION ..................................................................................................................................141
FIGURE 41: MEAN TIME PLOTS FOR DEPRESSION SCORE (POMS-D) ...........................................142
FIGURE 42: CHANGE IN DEPRESSION SCORES (EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY) MEASURED BY POMS-D .143
FIGURE 43: SPAGHETTI PLOTS OF TOTAL MOOD DISTURBANCE SCORE (POMS-TMD) PRE AND POST
DEPRESSION INDUCTION ..............................................................................................................144
FIGURE 44: MEAN TIME PLOTS FOR TOTAL MOOD DISTURBANCE SCORE (POMS-TMD) ..............145
FIGURE 45: CHANGE IN MOOD DISTURBANCE (EMOTIONAL REACTIVITY) AS MEASURED BY POMS-TMD ......................................................................................................................146
Abstract

Though opioid users report a decrease in negative emotions after opioid administration, there has been no formal study on the effect of opioids on emotional reactivity. This thesis details a body of work using mood induction procedures on opioid maintenance treatment patients, with the main aim of determining the effect of changing plasma opioid concentrations on emotional reactivity. Secondary aims include determining the relationship between pain sensitivity and depression or anxiety in methadone maintenance patients. In the first study, 21 patients on methadone maintenance and 21 Controls were induced into elated and depressed emotional states using Velten’s elation or depression induction procedures respectively. These procedures were administered at times corresponding with trough (0 hour) and peak (3 hours) plasma methadone concentrations. The response to the induction procedures were measured as emotional reactivity, using primary measures (Visual Analogue Scales) and secondary measures (Profile of Mood States scores). At 0 hour, methadone patients and Controls showed similar elation (Methadone 13.2 ± 3.1 [Mean ± SEM], Controls 14.4 ± 3.7) and depression reactivity (Methadone 23.6 ± 5.0, Controls 25.1 ± 5.0), as measured by Visual Analogue Scales. However at 3 hours, the methadone patients had significantly decreased depression (Methadone 18.5 ± 4.6, Controls 36.7 ± 5.7; p=0.021) and elation reactivity (Methadone 4.4 ± 1.9, Controls 19.0 ± 2.4; p = 0.01) compared to Controls. Methadone patients appeared to be less reactive to mood induction at times of peak plasma methadone concentration than Controls, suggesting that methadone blunts both elative and depressive emotional reactivity. Study 2 compared the effects of methadone and buprenorphine on emotional reactivity in opioid maintenance patients at steady state of dosing. 26 patients on buprenorphine maintenance, 27 patients on methadone maintenance and 27 Controls were induced into elative and depressive emotional states at either 1.5 hours or 3 hours post dose, corresponding with peak plasma buprenorphine and methadone concentrations respectively. The results show significant differences between the three groups in elation and depression reactivity scores, controlling for Beck’s Depression Inventory scores. Methadone patients showed a smaller increase in elation reactivity than buprenorphine patients (Methadone 13.3 ± 3.5, Buprenorphine 25.3 ± 3.4; p = 0.015), and a smaller increase in depression reactivity than buprenorphine patients (Methadone 20.3 ± 4.3, Buprenorphine 32.3 ± 4.2; p = 0.044) and Controls (Methadone 20.3 ± 4.3, Controls 35.8 ± 4.4; p = 0.021). This demonstrates that at time of peak plasma opioid concentration, methadone maintained patients are less reactive to mood induction than buprenorphine maintained patients. Therefore only methadone blunted
relative and depressive emotional reactivity. These results have improved our understanding of the psychotropic effects of opioid maintenance drugs. The results show that methadone blunts both elation and depression emotional reactivity in opioid dependent users and can be added to the range of effects that are observable at the time of peak plasma methadone concentrations. Buprenorphine, a partial µ-opioid agonist, does not blunt emotional reactivity in buprenorphine maintained treatment patients. As emotional reactivity has consequences in social and psychological functioning, consideration of the effect of opioids on emotional processing systems may improve treatment outcome.
Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree. I give consent to this copy of my thesis when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. The author acknowledges that copyright of published works contained within this thesis resides with the copyright holder(s) of those works. I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University’s digital research repository, the Library catalogue and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

List of publications:

Steven Mark Savvas, April 2013
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