



# The social life of naloxone

**Monday 21 October 1pm – 2pm**

## Speaker

**Dr Anna Olsen**

The Australian National University

## Location

**Larry Saha Room**

Haydon-Allen Building #22,  
Room 2175,  
University Avenue, ANU

This lecture is free and open to the  
public.

ANU Sociology Seminar Series  
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Hardon, van der Geest and Whyte, anthropologists who study medicines, contend that like other commodities, medicines acquire meaning as they enter into the life of people. As such, it is fruitful to follow medicines around in order to study their culturally situated uses. Medicines transform not only the physical body but also the social. Equally, the social can transform the meaning and efficacy of a medicine.

Naloxone is a short-acting opioid antagonist that reverses the respiratory depression caused by opioid overdose. The drug has been used by medical professionals for over 40 years. As a result of decades of lobbying by harm reduction advocates, naloxone is now available in Australia as a 'take-home' medicine for people who are at risk of opioid overdose, or who may witness an overdose. In an era where mortality and morbidity from opioid overdose is increasing, it is important

to ask questions about the application of a medicine that can save lives while paying attention to the social, moral, economic and symbolic meanings attached to the substance as it moves through different contexts.

I follow the changing status of this medicine from a clinician only drug to one available for use in the general community. Drawing on interview data and document analysis I examine the medical and non-medical meanings placed on naloxone by regulators (who control distribution), pharmacists (who mediate distribution and sale) and people who inject opioids (who both administer and receive this drug). Despite the physiological and socially enabling powers of the drug for people who inject drugs, distribution of naloxone is limited due to tensions in regulation and distribution. Medical representation of the drug along with ideological concerns with illicit drug use attach to naloxone as it moves into public use, presenting issues for the reimagining of this drug as one for common use.

**Dr Anna Olsen** is a Senior Lecturer in the Social Foundations of Medicine at the ANU Medical School. Her interdisciplinary program of research combines practical and critical approaches to public health, with a particular interest in marginalised populations and qualitative methodologies. Current research includes: pill testing; opioid overdose prevention; methamphetamine use; drug use and motherhood; domestic and family violence; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health; and ethical practice in social research. She values collaborative approaches to research and has extensive experience working with government and community on evaluation and research projects. Dr Olsen teaches and supervises post-graduate students across anthropology, medicine, public health and psychology.

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