

THE AUSTRALIAN

\$20m to develop anti-opioid drug implant

By **SARAH-JANE TASKER**, REPORTER

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The Perth-based doctor who pioneered a naltrexone implant to address drug addiction has been awarded a \$US20 million (\$28.6m) grant to trial his innovation in the US, which is dealing with an opioid epidemic.

Columbia University partnered with Go Medical, founded by George O'Neil, to implement a research program to advance the development of his naltrexone implant towards a new drug application approval by the US Food and Drug Administration.

The approval process has been aided by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse in the US. It has awarded Columbia University \$US6m over two years to conduct initial studies. Depending on the progress of the initial studies, another \$US13.9m could be awarded over three years for further studies.

The focus of the US study is to test the implant's effectiveness in the face of an epidemic of opioid overdoses and deaths.

Naltrexone, which reduces or eliminates opioid effects and reduces craving for opioids, is mostly prescribed in a tablet form that addicts have to take daily.

Dr O'Neil's implant releases small doses of naltrexone on a daily basis over six to nine months so addicts don't have to take a pill daily.

Ivan Montoya, deputy director, division of therapeutics and medical consequences at NIDA, said the institute was playing a major role in an initiative launched last year to provide scientific solutions to the national opioid overdose crisis in the US.

He said that initiative included developing improved treatment strategies for pain as well as opioid use disorders.

“This new initiative, funded by Congress, brings new hope for people, families and communities affected by this devastating crisis,” Dr Montoya said.

He added that the National Institutes of Health, which was behind the initiative, had nearly doubled funding for research on opioid misuse/addiction and pain treatment from approximately \$US600m in fiscal 2016 to \$US1.1 billion in fiscal 2018.

Dr Montoya said the naltrexone implant would improve adherence to naltrexone treatment by subjects, which he said had been less than optimal, to reduce the risk of relapses and prevent overdoses.

The device is a biodegradable implant inserted under the skin on the abdomen via a surgical procedure after the completion of opioid withdrawal.

Dr O’Neil, who also runs the Fresh Start Clinic in Perth, where the implant is offered, said he hoped the work being done in the US would be recognised by the Australian government for domestic approval.

Go Medical said it expected about 300 patients to be enrolled in the initial studies. The company said it could have an approved product on the market in the US in five years but added the time frame could be fast-tracked based on the trial results.

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Sarah-Jane Tasker has been a journalist for more than 20 years, having started her career on The Sunday Times in Perth. Her previous roles include deputy editor of the Kalgoorlie Miner in regional Western Austr... [Read more](#)

