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## HBO DOCUMENTARY FURTHER STIGMATIZES METHADONE TREATMENT

The stigmatization of methadone treatment is perpetuated and reinforced by the HBO documentary film *Methadonia*, which premiered at the New York Film Festival, and will be aired on the HBO cable network in the coming month. The film provides a narrow view of methadone treatment through the eyes of the filmmaker, who portrays the stories of eight persons in various stages of recovery and relapse. In the documentary, methadone and pharmacotherapy treatment are framed as "liquid handcuffs," which rob patients of the physical and emotional willpower to live normal, "drug free" lives. The documentary makes little reference to the more than 35 years of scientific and evidence-based research which has unequivocally affirmed methadone treatment's safety and efficacy, and demonstrated that it frees former opioid abusers from the ravages of addiction.

Medication-assisted methadone treatment is a proven and well-established intervention in treating opioid addiction, reducing criminality and improving public health. Methadone treatment, which is received by over 240,000 persons nationwide in the United States, has saved the lives of hundreds of thousands of former opioid addicts throughout the world. Nevertheless, this vital modality has been widely stigmatized, owing in part to misconceptions about the science of addiction and methadone treatment's critical role in treating addictive disease.

"This documentary neither provides an accurate depiction of the science that supports medication-assisted treatment, nor does it portray or properly represent the great majority of people for whom methadone treatment has proven to be the key to their recovery," said Mark Parrino, M.P.A., President of the American Association for the Treatment of Opioid Dependence (AATOD). "HBO has in the past produced exceptional documentaries that have enlightened and educated the public on issues of



social relevance, including addiction-related features. Unfortunately, in this case, *Methadonia* falls short of the standards of accuracy and truth in context."

The White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the federal Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT), the National Institutes of Health (NIH), and the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), have all undertaken significant efforts to advance progress in addressing the nation's considerable drug problems. These agencies have sought to aggressively address the stigma that hinders the growing and important role that medication-assisted treatment holds in national policy efforts.

"The favorable outcomes of methadone and other pharmacotherapeutic treatments have been supported by a body of evidence in hundreds of published reports from throughout the world," Mark Parrino explains. "In 1997, an NIH Consensus Panel affirmed that addiction to opioid drugs is not a matter of willpower, but a medical, brain-related disorder to be treated like any other disease. These findings are not adequately reflected in the HBO documentary."

The unique role of the journalistic and entertainment media in educating, providing fair and accurate portrayals, and influencing public understanding, makes it a natural collaborator in the crucial work of impacting our national drug problems, and counteracting the devastating impact of stigma. AATOD and its member organizations, invites HBO, colleagues, members of the public, other media sources, the provider community and interested advocacy groups, to enter into a balanced and constructive dialogue. We must move the conversation beyond bias and the "politics of addiction" and beyond the limited and distorted views of "*Methadonia*".

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