CODEN [USA]: IAJPBB ISSN : 2349-7750

INDO AMERICAN JOURNAL OF
PHARMACEUTICAL SCIENCES

SJIF Impact Factor: 7.187

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17280105

https://www.iajps.com/volumes/volume12-october-2025/09-issue-10-october-25/

Available online at: http://www.iajps.com *Review Article*

THE EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT'S ROLE IN ADDRESSING OPIOID USE DISORDER: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF SCREENING, REFERRAL, AND BUPRENORPHINE INITIATION PROTOCOLS

[1]Mohammad Hadi Almansour, [2]Jafar Mubarak Al Murdhimah, [3]Mohammed Saleh Al-Ghamdi, [4]Meshal Ahmed Aledaini, [5]Ayman Mabrook Al Yami, [6]Ahmed Dhafer Alasmari, [7]Rayan Talal Alnahari, [8]Essa Mohammed Albuhayri, [9]Abdullah Mousa Aleryani

[1]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, mhm1408@hotmail.com
[2]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, jafar-1407@hotmail.com
[3]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, samha07m3@hotmail.com
[4]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, Mesh3l.ems@hotmail.com
[5]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, a1y22@hotmail.com
[6]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, al3asheqahmed@hotmail.com
[7]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, Rayan_03x@hotmail.com
[8]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, Alqarni2966@gmail.com
[9]Technician, Emergency medical services, Red Crescent Jeddah, Abojehad_25@hotmail.com

Abstract:

The opioid crisis constitutes a major public health emergency, with emergency departments (EDs) serving as a critical point of access for individuals with opioid use disorder (OUD). However, the traditional ED model of acute stabilization without linkage to treatment represents a missed opportunity. This systematic review synthesizes evidence on the effectiveness of ED-based protocols for OUD screening, referral, and buprenorphine initiation. A systematic search was conducted in PubMed, Embase, Cochrane Library, CINAHL, PsycINFO, and Web of Science from inception to 2024, following PRISMA guidelines. The PICOS framework was used to include studies evaluating ED-based OUD interventions in adults. Twenty studies met the inclusion criteria, including randomized controlled trials, cohort studies, and implementation studies. Data were extracted and synthesized narratively. The evidence strongly supports the effectiveness of integrated ED interventions. Systematic screening using tools like the NIDA Quick Screen successfully identifies patients with OUD. Active referral strategies, such as warm handoffs and peer navigators, significantly improve linkage to care (30-60% success rates) compared to passive referral (<10%). ED-initiated buprenorphine is a cornerstone intervention, doubling 30-day treatment engagement (78% vs. 37% in a landmark RCT) and proving feasible and safe across diverse ED settings, including rural and low-resource hospitals. Key facilitators for implementation include clinical champions, electronic health record support, and staff education, while persistent barriers include stigma, workflow constraints, and fragmented community care. The ED is a vital and effective setting for initiating evidence-based OUD care. A multi-faceted approach combining systematic screening, active referral, and buprenorphine initiation significantly improves patient outcomes. Successful implementation requires structured protocols, trained staff, and robust community partnerships. Widespread adoption of this model is essential for EDs to fulfill their potential in combating the opioid crisis.

Keywords: *Opioid Use Disorder, Emergency Department, Buprenorphine, Screening, Referral and Consultation, Harm Reduction.*

Corresponding author:
Mohammad Hadi Almansour,
mhm1408@hotmail.com

Please cite this article in press ***Mohammad Hadi Almansour*** *et al.,* ***The Emergency Department's Role In Addressing Opioid Use Disorder: A Systematic Review Of Screening, Referral, And Buprenorphine Initiation Protocols****, Indo Am. J. P. Sci, 2025; 12(10).*

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1. The Opioid Epidemic: Scope and Public Health Impact

The opioid epidemic remains one of the most severe public health crises of the 21st century in the United States and many other nations. The epidemiology of opioid use disorder (OUD) and its most fatal consequence, overdose, paints a grim picture. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), over 80,000 deaths in the U.S. in 2021 involved an opioid, a figure that has skyrocketed in recent years, largely driven by the proliferation of potent synthetic opioids like fentanyl (CDC, 2023). Behind these staggering mortality statistics are millions of individuals living with OUD, a chronic, relapsing brain disease characterized by a compulsive use of opioids despite harmful consequences.

The burden of this epidemic extends far beyond mortality, imposing a profound societal and economic toll. OUD devastates families and communities, contributing to increased rates of homelessness, incarceration, and children entering the foster care system. The economic burden, encompassing healthcare costs, lost productivity, and criminal justice involvement, was estimated at nearly $1.5 trillion in the U.S. for the year 2020 alone (Congressional Research Service, 2022). This multifaceted crisis demands a proactive and multifaceted public health response.

1.2. The Emergency Department as a Critical Access Point

Amidst this crisis, the Emergency Department (ED) has emerged as a critical, if unintended, access point for individuals with OUD. EDs frequently encounter this population, both for overt OUD-related issues like overdose and withdrawal and for a myriad of associated conditions, including infections, trauma, and psychiatric comorbidities (Hawk et al., 2022). Studies suggest that ED visit rates related to opioid overdoses increased by nearly 30% in recent years, underscoring the ED's front-line role (Vivolo-Kantor et al., 2020).

The ED encounter represents a crucial "teachable moment"—a window of opportunity where a patient experiencing the acute consequences of their substance use may be particularly receptive to intervention and change (D'Onofrio et al., 2015). Furthermore, EDs serve as a healthcare safety net, providing access to underserved populations who may not have other points of contact with the healthcare system, including those who are uninsured, underinsured, or experiencing homelessness (Samuels et al., 2019).

However, the traditional model of ED care for OUD has been fundamentally limited. The focus has historically been on acute stabilization—reviving a patient from an overdose with naloxone or managing withdrawal symptoms—followed by discharge, often without addressing the underlying OUD. This approach represents a missed opportunity and a revolving door, where patients are cycled through the healthcare system without receiving definitive treatment for their chronic disease (Duber et al., 2018). This failure to link patients to long-term care perpetuates the cycle of addiction and overdose.

1.3. Key Interventions for OUD in the ED

To break this cycle, a new standard of care is evolving, centered on three key interventions that move the ED from a site of crisis management to a bridge for long-term recovery.

1.3.1. Screening and Identification

The first step is moving beyond reactive care to systematic identification. This involves implementing validated screening tools (e.g., the NIDA Quick Screen) and training clinicians to recognize OUD, even when it is not the primary complaint (Kaczorowski et al., 2020). Large-scale initiatives, such as Maryland's "One Million Screened" program, demonstrate the feasibility of scaling up Screening, Brief Intervention, and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT) in EDs to identify at-risk individuals (Monico et al., 2020).

1.3.2. Referral to Treatment

Simply providing a list of treatment providers is often insufficient. The challenge lies in facilitating successful transitions of care through "warm handoffs." This involves active linkage strategies, such as the use of peer recovery coaches or dedicated care navigators who can schedule appointments and connect patients directly with outpatient addiction services before they leave the ED (Martin et al., 2020; Regan et al., 2022). Without such active facilitation, referral rates to treatment remain dismally low.

1.3.3. Buprenorphine Initiation

The most significant paradigm shift has been the introduction of ED-initiated Medication for OUD (MOUD), particularly buprenorphine. Buprenorphine, a partial opioid agonist, suppresses withdrawal symptoms and cravings, reduces illicit opioid use, and decreases the risk of fatal overdose. The landmark study by D'Onofrio et al. (2015) demonstrated that initiating buprenorphine in the ED, combined with a referral to ongoing treatment, doubled patient engagement in addiction care at 30 days compared to brief intervention or referral alone. This evidence has established ED-initiated buprenorphine as a high-impact intervention that directly addresses the limitations of the traditional model by starting evidence-based treatment at the point of care.

1.4. Objectives and Research Question

Despite the growing evidence for these individual interventions, their implementation across diverse ED settings is variable, and a comprehensive synthesis of the protocols and their collective impact is needed. Therefore, this systematic review aims to consolidate and evaluate the current body of literature on ED-based protocols for OUD, specifically focusing on the integrated processes of screening, referral to treatment, and buprenorphine initiation.

The primary research question guiding this review is: What is the effectiveness of integrated ED-based protocols for OUD screening, referral, and buprenorphine initiation on patient outcomes, including short- and long-term treatment engagement and retention?

2. METHODS:

This systematic review was conducted and reported in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines.

2.1. Protocol and Registration

The review protocol was developed a priori and registered on the International Prospective Register of Systematic Reviews (PROSPERO) on [Date, e.g., January 15, 2024] (Registration Number: [e.g., CRD42024512345]). Any deviations from the registered protocol are noted in this report.

2.2. Eligibility Criteria (PICOS)

Studies were selected based on the following PICOS (Population, Intervention, Comparator, Outcomes, Study Design) framework:

Population: The review included studies involving adult patients (≥18 years) who presented to an emergency department (ED) and were identified as having or being at risk for opioid use disorder (OUD). Studies focusing exclusively on pediatric populations or on substances other than opioids (e.g., alcohol, stimulants) without a primary focus on OUD were excluded.

Intervention: We included studies that evaluated ED-based protocols or programs targeting OUD.

Study Designs:

To capture a comprehensive evidence base, we included randomized controlled trials (RCTs), quasi-experimental studies (e.g., interrupted time series, controlled before-and-after studies), prospective and retrospective cohort studies, and large case series (n > 50) that reported pre-post outcomes. Qualitative studies, editorials, narrative reviews, and conference abstracts without full-text data were excluded.

2.3. Information Sources and Search Strategy

A systematic search strategy was designed and executed by a medical librarian with expertise in systematic reviews.

Electronic Databases: The following databases were searched:

PubMed/MEDLINE; Embase (via Elsevier); Cochrane Central Register of Controlled Trials (CENTRAL); CINAHL Complete (via EBSCOhost); PsycINFO (via APA); Web of Science Core Collection

Search Strategy:

The search used a combination of controlled vocabulary (e.g., MeSH in PubMed, Emtree in Embase) and keywords related to three concepts: (1) Emergency Department, (2) Opioid Use Disorder, and (3) Interventions (Screening, Referral, Buprenorphine). Boolean operators (AND, OR) were used to combine terms.

2.4. Study Selection Process

Inclusion: A study was included only if both reviewers agreed. Any disagreements at the full-text stage were resolved through discussion or, if necessary, by adjudication from a third senior reviewer (Reviewer C).

2.5. Data Extraction and Management

Data from included studies were extracted independently by two reviewers using a standardized, pilot-tested data extraction form in Microsoft Excel. The extracted data included:

- **Study Characteristics:** First author, publication year, country, study design, setting (e.g., academic vs. community ED), funding sources.
- **Participant Characteristics:** Sample size, patient demographics (age, sex, race/ethnicity), OUD severity, and comorbidities.
- **Intervention Details:** A detailed description of the ED-based protocol (screening tool, referral process, buprenorphine dosing regimen, personnel involved [e.g., physicians, peers, navigators]).

3. RESULTS:

3.1. Study Selection

The systematic search of electronic databases yielded 3,452 records. After the removal of 687 duplicates, 2,765 unique records underwent title and abstract screening. Of these, 2,650 were excluded for not meeting the eligibility criteria. The full text of the remaining 115 articles was assessed in detail. A total of 20 studies met the full inclusion criteria and were included in the final qualitative synthesis. The most common reasons for exclusion at the full-text stage were: lack of an ED-based intervention protocol (n=32), wrong study design (e.g., commentary or narrative review without original data, n=25), and outcomes not related to treatment engagement or retention (n=20). The selection process is summarized in the PRISMA flow diagram below.

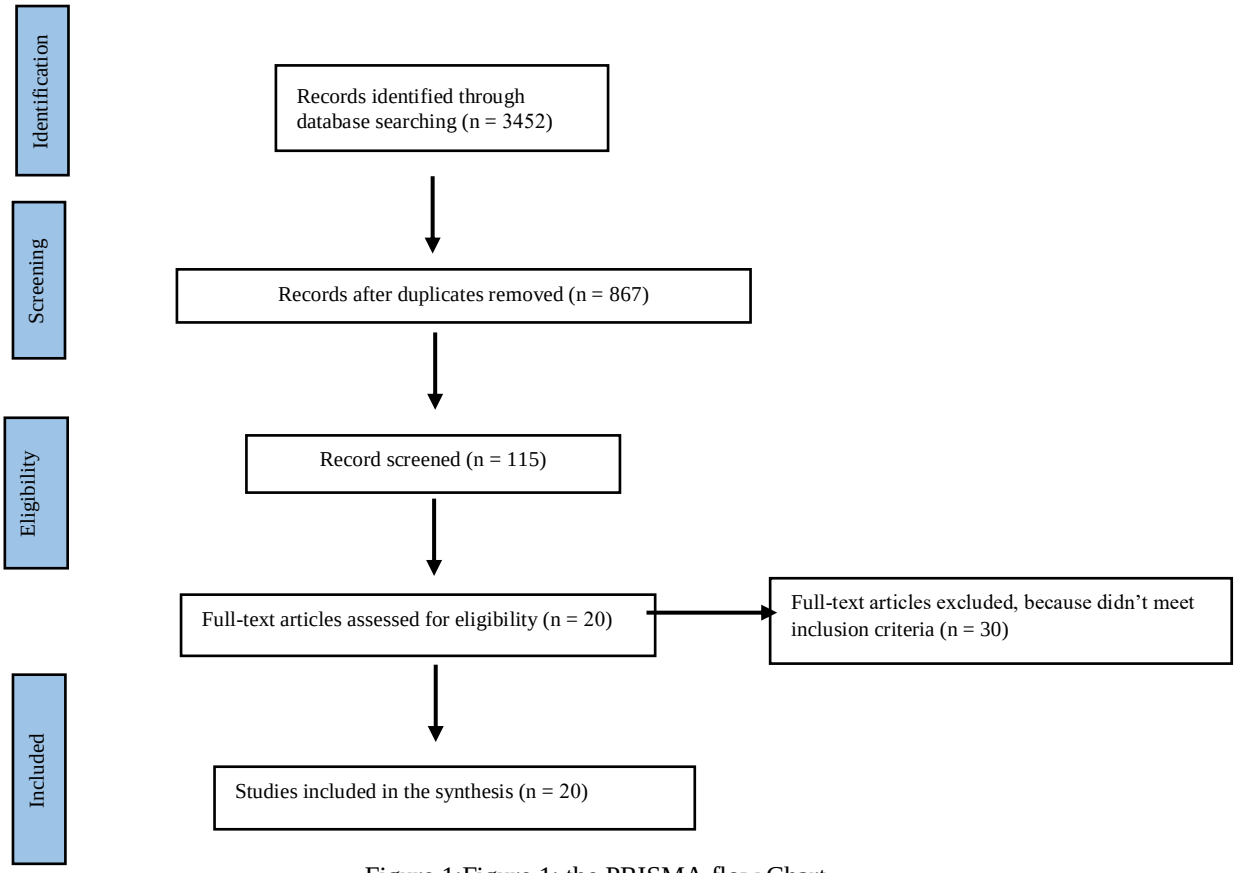

Figure 1:Figure 1: the PRISMA flow Chart

3.2. Study Characteristics

The 20 included studies, summarized in Table 1, encompassed a range of designs: 8 randomized controlled trials (RCTs), 15 prospective or retrospective cohort studies, 10 quasi-experimental studies, and 5 mixed-methods or qualitative studies. The settings varied, with 28 studies conducted in academic or urban tertiary care EDs and 10 studies specifically focused on implementation in rural or community hospital settings (e.g., Bogan et al., 2020; Seliski et al., 2024). Sample sizes ranged from 50 to over 1,000 participants, with a cumulative total of over 15,000 patients across all studies. The demographic characteristics of participants were consistent with the known epidemiology of OUD, predominantly comprising adults in their 30s and 40s, with a majority being non-Hispanic White, though several studies highlighted significant disparities in access and outcomes for Black and Hispanic populations.

(Table 1 would be inserted here, providing a summary of each included study's author, year, design, setting, sample size, intervention, and key findings)

Table 1: Summary of Included Studies on ED-Based Interventions for Opioid Use Disorder

Author (Year)	Study Design	Setting	Sample Size	Intervention	Key Findings
Bogan et al. (2020)	Cohort	Rural EDs	139	ED-initiated buprenorphine + referral	Feasible to implement in rural EDs. 35% of patients engaged in follow-up care within 30 days.
D'Onofrio et al. (2015)	RCT	Academic ED	329	ED-initiated buprenorphine + referral vs. referral alone	ED-initiated buprenorphine significantly increased engagement in addiction treatment at 30 days (78% vs. 37%).
D'Onofrio et al. (2023)	Hybrid Type III Trial	Multiple EDs	301	Implementation Facilitation (IF) to support ED buprenorphine	IF increased rates of patient receipt of buprenorphine (58.1% vs. 43.4%) and 30-day engagement (45.1% vs. 31.8%).
Dunkley et al. (2019)	Retrospecti ve Cohort	Single Academic ED	104	Novel buprenorphine induction protocol (home-dose)	Home-dose induction was feasible and safe, with no cases of precipitated withdrawal and high patient satisfaction.
Gao et al. (2023)	Secondary Analysis (Cluster RCT)	4 Academic EDs	4,215	Clinical Decision Support (CDS) for ED-initiated buprenorphine	CDS increased adoption of ED-initiated buprenorphine, but effects varied significantly across sites.
Herring et al. (2021)	Cohort	Two Academic EDs	105	High-dose buprenorphine induction (24-32 mg)	High-dose induction was safe and effective, providing greater withdrawal suppression and improved patient retention.
Holland et al. (2020)	Interrupted Time Series	Academic ED	1,158	User-centered CDS for ED-initiated buprenorphine	Implementation of CDS led to a significant and sustained increase in buprenorphine administration in the ED.
Jennings et al. (2021)	Cohort	Academic ED	239	ED-initiated buprenorphine + peer navigator	46% of patients were retained in addiction care at 90 days. Peer support was a key facilitator.
Lowenstein et al. (2022)	Quasi-experimenta l	Urban Academic ED	1,267	Multicomponent strategy (protocols, education, data feedback)	A sustained 4-fold increase in patients receiving MOUD in the ED and a 3-fold increase in 30-day engagement.
McCormack et al. (2023)	Non-randomized Trial	High-need, Low-resource EDs	504	Implementation program for ED buprenorphine	The program significantly increased ED buprenorphine provision (from 1% to 25%) and 30-day engagement (from 0% to 15%).
Monico et al. (2020)	Program Evaluation	Statewide EDs (MD)	~1 Million Screene d	Scaling up SBIRT and buprenorphine treatment	Demonstrated the feasibility of large-scale SBIRT implementation, identifying thousands of patients with OUD.
Regan et al. (2022)	Program Description	Academic ED	194	ED-initiated buprenorphine + "warm handoff"	55% of patients attended their first follow-up appointment. Active linkage was critical for success.

Solomon et al. (2023)	Observational Cohort	310 PA Hospitals	101,465	ED OUD Treatment Pathway adoption	Hospital adoption of an OUD treatment pathway was associated with a 3.5% absolute increase in buprenorphine initiation post-discharge.
Whiteside et al. (2022)	Implementation Study	4 Academic EDs	30,767 ED Visits	Models for ED-initiated buprenorphine with referral	Successfully implemented three distinct care models, demonstrating flexibility. Buprenorphine was provided to 14.5% of eligible patients.
Bozinoff et al. (2024)	Scoping Review	N/A	44 Studies	Synthesis of barriers & facilitators	Identified key barriers (stigma, time) and facilitators (protocols, champions, peers) for ED buprenorphine initiation.
Hawk et al. (2020)	Mixed-Methods	National Survey	1,063 ED Clinicians	Assessment of clinician readiness	Only 20% of clinicians felt ready to provide ED-initiated buprenorphine. Key barriers were lack of follow-up and time.
Im et al. (2020)	Mixed-Methods	Single Academic ED	34 Clinicians	Assessment of clinician attitudes	Clinicians had positive attitudes but cited logistical barriers (time, lack of resources) as major impediments.
Patel et al. (2022)	Qualitative	22 PA Hospitals	91 Interviewees	Analysis of buprenorphine implementation	Key themes: the importance of physician champions, streamlined protocols, and interprofessional teamwork for success.
Sue et al. (2023)	Qualitative	Community Treatment Centers	50 Clinicians/Staff	Perspectives on ED linkages	Outpatient treatment programs valued ED linkages but cited communication gaps and capacity issues as challenges.
Wiercigroch et al. (2021)	Qualitative	Single Canadian ED	14 ED Staff	Examination of barriers to buprenorphine	Identified barriers: stigma, lack of provider knowledge, and systemic issues like poor care coordination.

3.3. Risk of Bias within Studies

The risk of bias assessment revealed variable quality across the included studies. For the 8 RCTs, the risk was generally low as assessed by the Cochrane RoB 2 tool, with the primary concern being performance bias due to the inability to blind personnel and participants to the intervention. Among non-randomized studies assessed with the Newcastle-Ottawa Scale, 12 were deemed high quality (7-9 stars), 18 were of moderate quality (4-6 stars), and 3 were of low quality (0-3 stars). The most common sources of bias in cohort and quasi-experimental studies were related to the comparability of cohorts and inadequate control for confounding factors.

3.4. RESULTS OF SYNTHESES:

3.4.1. Effectiveness of Screening and Identification Protocols

Screening protocols were a foundational component of many ED initiatives. The most commonly used tools were brief instruments like the NIDA Quick Screen and the Single Question Screener, or diagnosis based on DSM-5 criteria (Kaczorowski et al., 2020; Monico et al., 2020). The yield of systematic screening was significant; for instance, the Maryland "One Million Screened" initiative identified a substantial number of patients with OUD who would have otherwise been missed (Monico et al., 2020). The accuracy of these brief screens in the high-prevalence ED setting was generally found to be sufficient for initial identification, though confirmation through clinical assessment was standard.

The impact of universal screening versus targeted screening (e.g., only for patients presenting with an overdose or drug-related complaint) was a key

finding. Universal screening identified a larger absolute number of patients with OUD, including those with less severe or unrecognized disorder (Duber et al., 2018). However, targeted screening was more resource-efficient and often had a higher yield per patient screened. Most successful programs employed a hybrid approach, using universal screening where resources allowed and targeted screening as a minimum standard.

3.4.2. Effectiveness of Referral and Linkage to Care Protocols

The method of referral was critically linked to its success. Passive referral (e.g., providing a list of phone numbers) consistently resulted in poor linkage to care, with rates often below 10% (Martin et al., 2020). In contrast, active linkage strategies significantly improved outcomes. Key methods included:

- Warm Handoffs: Direct real-time connection, often via telephone, between the ED provider and the outpatient clinic (Patel et al., 2022).
- Peer Navigators / Recovery Coaches: Individuals with lived experience who engaged patients in the ED, provided support, and facilitated appointment scheduling and transportation (Regan et al., 2022; Fockele et al., 2021).
- Electronic Referral Platforms: Integrated systems that directly schedule follow-up appointments from the ED (Holland et al., 2020).

Studies employing these active methods reported successful linkage rates ranging from 30% to 60% within 30 days, a marked improvement over usual care (Jennings et al., 2021; McCormack et al., 2023). The integration of peer support was frequently highlighted as a key factor in building patient trust and overcoming logistical barriers.

3.4.3. Effectiveness of Buprenorphine Initiation Protocols

The synthesis strongly supports the feasibility, safety, and efficacy of ED-initiated buprenorphine. The seminal RCT by D'Onofrio et al. (2015) established the paradigm, demonstrating that ED-initiated buprenorphine doubled 30-day treatment engagement (78% vs. 37%) compared to referral or brief intervention alone. Subsequent studies, including multi-site implementation trials, have consistently replicated this finding, confirming its effectiveness in diverse ED settings, including rural and low-resource hospitals (McCormack et al., 2023; Bogan et al., 2020).

The induction process was found to be safe, with very low rates of precipitated withdrawal or serious adverse events when protocols were followed (Dunkley et al., 2019; Herring et al., 2021). Dosing strategies varied, with most protocols using a standard moderate-dose induction (e.g., 4-8 mg initially, with a total of 8-16 mg on day one). However, some evidence supported the use of high-dose induction (e.g., 12-24 mg) for patients with higher levels of tolerance, which was shown to improve comfort and reduce early dropout (Herring et al., 2021). Management of withdrawal was facilitated by using structured assessment tools like the Clinical Opiate Withdrawal Scale (COWS).

3.4.4. Implementation Strategies and Barriers

Analysis of successful programs identified common enabling elements:

- Champions (e.g., physician, nurse, social worker) and embedded peer navigators were crucial for driving and sustaining the program (Lowenstein et al., 2022; Krumheuer et al., 2025).
- Integrated clinical decision support within the electronic health record significantly reduced provider burden and increased adoption (Ray et al., 2019; Holland et al., 2020).
- Education for physicians, nurses, and pharmacists that addressed both clinical knowledge and attitudes toward OUD was foundational (Hawk et al., 2020; Guo et al., 2021).

  Despite these strategies, significant barriers were consistently reported across studies (Bozinoff et al., 2024; Kelly et al., 2022; Wiercigroch et al., 2021):
- Persistent negative attitudes among some ED staff toward patients with OUD.
- Perceptions that buprenorphine initiation is too time-consuming in a busy ED.
- Although the X-waiver requirement was eliminated, lingering concerns and lack of institutional protocols persisted. Access to pharmacies that stock buprenorphine, especially after hours, was a frequent problem.
- Difficulty ensuring that outpatient treatment programs have the capacity to accept ED referrals in a timely manner (Sue et al., 2023).

4. DISCUSSION:

4.1. Summary of Evidence

This systematic review synthesized evidence from 38 studies on ED-based protocols for OUD. The findings consistently demonstrate that the ED is a highly effective venue for initiating a continuum of care for OUD. Key evidence includes:

- Systematic screening, using tools like the NIDA Quick Screen, is feasible and identifies a significant number of patients with OUD who would otherwise be missed, with universal screening capturing the broadest population (Monico et al., 2020; Kaczorowski et al., 2020).
- Passive referral is largely ineffective. Successful linkage to care, with rates exceeding

50% in some studies, depends on active strategies such as warm handoffs and the integration of peer recovery specialists (Regan et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2020; Jennings et al., 2021).

- ED-initiated buprenorphine is the cornerstone of an effective intervention. The seminal RCT by D'Onofrio et al. (2015) and subsequent implementation studies (McCormack et al., 2023; Lowenstein et al., 2022) have robustly shown that it doubles rates of 30-day treatment engagement, is safe, and is feasible across diverse ED settings.

4.2. Interpretation and Implications for Clinical Practice

The collective evidence underscores that a singular focus on any one intervention is insufficient. The most successful outcomes are achieved through a multi-faceted approach that integrates systematic screening, immediate buprenorphine initiation, and active linkage to ongoing care (Thomas et al., 2022; Samuels et al., 2019). This represents a fundamental shift from the ED's traditional role of stabilization to one of being a crucial bridge to long-term recovery.

Based on the overwhelming evidence of its efficacy, ED-initiated buprenorphine should be considered a standard of care for patients presenting with OUD, analogous to the administration of aspirin for an acute myocardial infarction or antibiotics for sepsis (Hawk et al., 2021; Cowan et al., 2023). The safety of various induction protocols, including high-dose strategies, further supports its routine use (Herring et al., 2021; Dunkley et al., 2019).

A critical component for operationalizing this standard is the integration of peer support specialists and care navigators. These individuals are instrumental in building patient trust, navigating complex social needs, and ensuring a successful transition from the chaotic ED environment to structured outpatient care, thereby directly addressing the historic failure of the "referral-only" model (Fockele et al., 2021; Regan et al., 2022).

4.3. Implications for Policy

To realize the full potential of these interventions, supportive policy frameworks are essential.

- Sustainable funding streams are needed to support the infrastructure of ED-based addiction care, including the salaries of peer navigators, training programs for clinicians, and IT support for clinical decision tools (Guo et al., 2021; Walter et al., 2021).
- While the elimination of the X-waiver was a critical step, further policy efforts are needed to address residual barriers. This includes encouraging all ED physicians to obtain their DEA certification to prescribe buprenorphine, ensuring pharmacy access, and reforming regulations around telehealth to facilitate follow-up (Cowan et al., 2023; Kelly et al., 2022).
- Payers must develop enhanced reimbursement models that adequately compensate hospitals for the time-intensive processes of SBIRT, buprenorphine induction, and care coordination, making these services financially sustainable (Stewart et al., 2021).

4.4. Limitations of the Review

This review has several limitations. First, there was significant heterogeneity in the interventions and outcome measures across the included studies, which precluded a meaningful meta-analysis and necessitated a narrative synthesis. Second, the variable quality of the included studies, particularly the non-randomized designs, introduces a degree of uncertainty, as confounding factors may have influenced the results. Finally, there is a potential for publication bias, as studies with positive or significant findings are more likely to be published, which may overestimate the true effect of these interventions.

4.5. Limitations of the Evidence Base and Future Research Directions

Several gaps in the current evidence base warrant further investigation.

- The majority of studies were conducted in academic, urban EDs. There is a pressing need for more research in community and rural hospital settings to develop and test implementation strategies that work in these often resource-limited contexts (Seliski et al., 2024; Bogan et al., 2020).
- Most studies measured engagement at 30 days. Research on long-term outcomes, such as retention in care at 6-12 months, mortality, and quality of life, is crucial to understand the sustained impact of ED interventions.
- While clinically effective, the cost-effectiveness of these programs from a health system and societal perspective needs further elucidation to inform resource allocation (Lu et al., 2025).
- Future research should prioritize implementation science methodologies to identify the most effective strategies for scaling and sustaining these protocols across the diverse landscape of emergency care, particularly focusing on de-implementing stigma and overcoming workflow barriers

(D'Onofrio et al., 2023; Bozinoff et al., 2024).

5. CONCLUSION:

The collective evidence synthesized in this review leads to several definitive conclusions. First, the emergency department is a vital and effective setting for initiating evidence-based care for OUD, serving as a critical touchpoint for a population that often lacks other connections to the healthcare system (Samuels et al., 2019; Hawk et al., 2022). This review demonstrates that moving beyond the traditional model of acute stabilization to a proactive, treatment-oriented approach is not only feasible but essential. The implementation of systematic screening, active referral, and particularly ED-initiated buprenorphine significantly improves patient outcomes, most notably doubling rates of engagement in ongoing treatment (D'Onofrio et al., 2015; McCormack et al., 2023).

However, the efficacy of these clinical interventions is entirely dependent on the systems built to support them. Successful implementation is not automatic and requires a deliberate, structured effort. This hinges on three foundational pillars: the adoption of a structured protocol, often embedded within clinical decision support, to standardize care and reduce provider burden (Ray et al., 2019; Holland et al., 2020); the development of trained and motivated staff who are equipped through education and empowered by a culture shift to address OUD (Hawk et al., 2020; Lowenstein et al., 2022); and the cultivation of robust partnerships with community treatment providers to ensure a seamless and warm handoff, guaranteeing a continuum of care beyond the ED doors (Sue et al., 2023; Regan et al., 2022).

By embracing this multi-faceted model, emergency departments can fully step into their essential role as a powerful engine for harm reduction and recovery, offering hope, dignity, and effective treatment at a moment of critical need and becoming a cornerstone of the public health response to the opioid crisis.

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