

What proportion of people starting OST reach zero quickly?

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Introduction

Previous work has shown that the people who come off opiate substitution therapy (OST) in specialist service for the treatment of opiate dependence can be divided into two groups (Cohen 2017). The first require short term treatment lasting 1 year, but occasionally up to 3 years; the second group are in long-term treatment for 6-12 years before slowly reducing the dose of OST medication with methadone or buprenorphine to zero.

The previous study was not able to quantify how many people were in each group.

This study uses contemporaneous data of OST medication doses and urine drug screens to estimate the proportion of people starting on OST who show the short term pattern of progress through treatment, as part of a study about how people fare at the start of treatment

Method

ResoLUTIONs is a community based service treating Luton Residents with drug problems. Luton Borough Council changed providers for this service on 1 April 2017

The clinical diagnosis of all patients on OST in this study is the opiate dependence syndrome (ICD-10 code F11.2). Patients also receive psychosocial intervention and recovery activities such as assistance with accommodation and occupation/employment. Around 500 patients are in treatment at any one time.

As part of clinical monitoring, the dose of OST medication, changes to the dose and urine drug screen results were collected for all patients. Gender and age on 1/4/17 was recorded. From these, the pattern of progress was charted. Those patients who started in treatment after 1 April 2017 but before 16 February 2019, were identified and followed up until 30 September 2020 to see how they progressed and how many showed the pattern of starting treatment, stabilising on OST and reducing to zero, described in the paper as a Mountain Top pattern (Figure 1)

As the data was collected in the course of routine clinical practice and the study was a service evaluation, the approval of a Research Ethical Committee was not required.

Because numbers in the study were small, it was not possible to undertake statistical analysis

Findings

362 patients started on OST in the study period. 22 patients (6.1%) showed the Mountain Top (MT) patterns of progress through the service (starting on treatment, titrating up, stabilising and reducing down to 0, exemplified in Figure 1). The average age of the MT patients was 34.3 years, compared to 37.3 in the other patients. 77.3% of the MT patients were male, 71.2% of the others. 19 MT patients (86.4%) completed their treatment within 2 years compared with 171 (50.3%) of the other patients. However, 83 (87.4%) of the other patients who were in treatment for 1 year and 43 (56.6%) for 2 years left treatment because they dropped out. The majority (138, 81.7%) of the other patients who were in treatment for more than 2 years were still in treatment at the end of the study period. (Table 1). In respect of drug screens in MT patients, 3 did not have any screens in the course of treatment, 1 only gave screens containing opiates, 13 gave screens that did not contain any non-prescribed substance, and 2 gave samples that were negative for opiates but positive for cocaine and 3 were positive for benzodiazepines. 7 of the 13 patients who gave clean samples did so within 28 days of coming into treatment.

Discussion

This study finds that only 6.1% of people starting on OST go through a Mountain Top pattern of treatment, as envisaged by the UK Government Drug Strategy in 2017 (HM Gov 2017; no comment is made in the 2021 strategy, HM Gov 2021). Of the other patients, many drop out in the first 2 years; those who remain in treatment and appear to start to go into a chronic phase. However, this picture of retention is significantly greater than found in a large US study, in which only 36% of patients started on OST were still in treatment after 6 months (Krawczyk et al 2021)

Drug treatment services need to provide for the needs of patients who go through a Mountain Top pattern of progress, but be structured for the needs of patients who may be in treatment for decades

Group/yr in Rx	a	d	r	s	t	z	Total
MT<1	0	0	0	0	0	9	9
MT 1-2	0	0	0	0	0	10	10
MT 2-3	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
MT 3-4	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Other <1	1	83 (87.4)	10	1 (1.1)	3	6	95
Other 1-2	0	43 (56.6)	1	27 (35.5)	4	1	76
Other 2-3	0	26 (24.3)	1	80 (74.8)	0	0	107
Other 3-4	0	4 (6.5)	0	58 (93.5)	0	0	62

Table 1: duration in treatment of different patient groups

MT = mountain top pattern of progress in treatment (Figure 1),
Other=those other patients whose progress was not of the MT type;
a = went abroad to detoxify; d = dropped out of treatment (Figure 2);
r = went into clinical recovery; s = still in treatment at the end of the study;
t = transfer to another service; z = reduce to zero
Numbers in the squares are numbers of patients, percentage in brackets

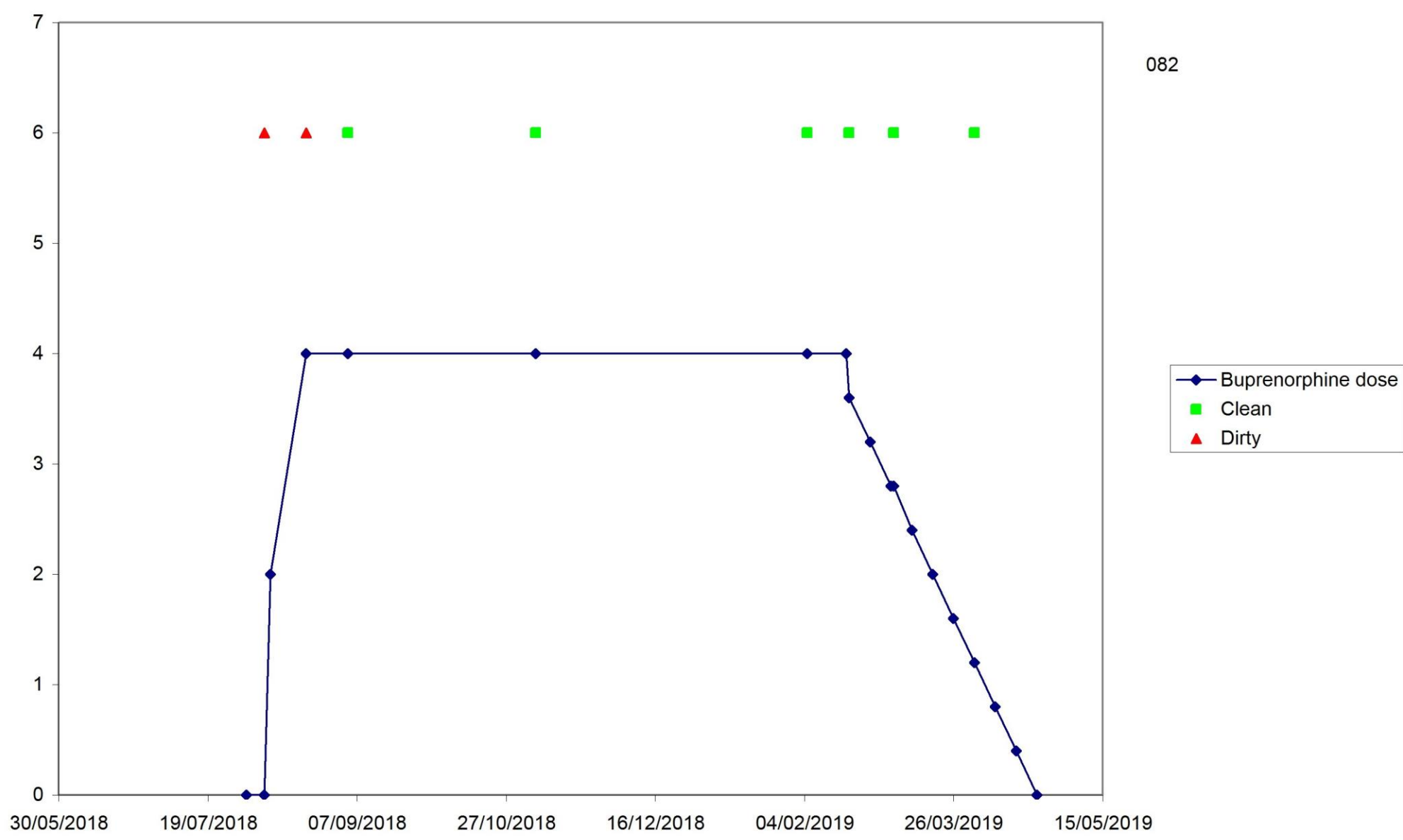


Figure 1: Mountain Top Pattern of Progress

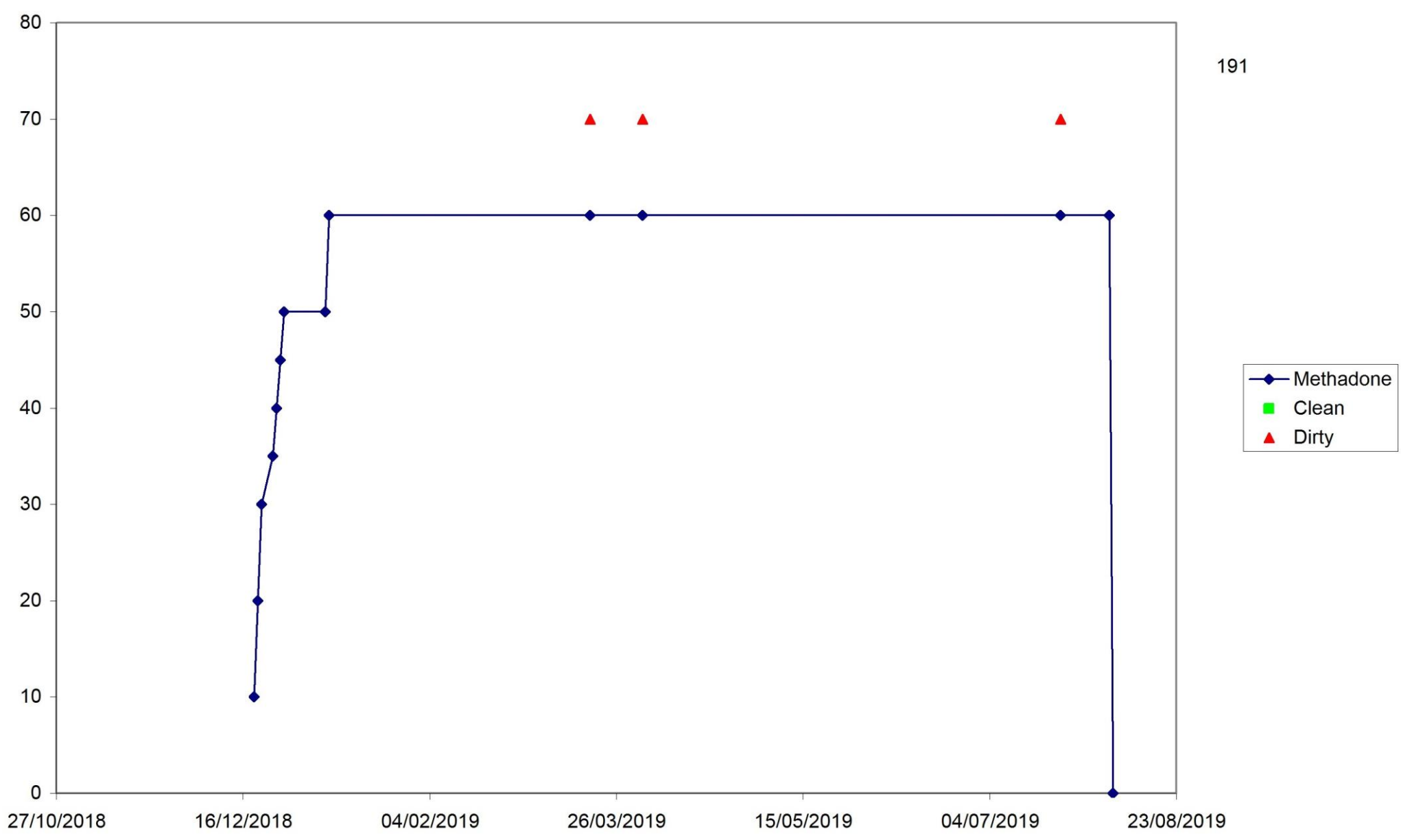


Figure 2: pattern of patients who dropped out

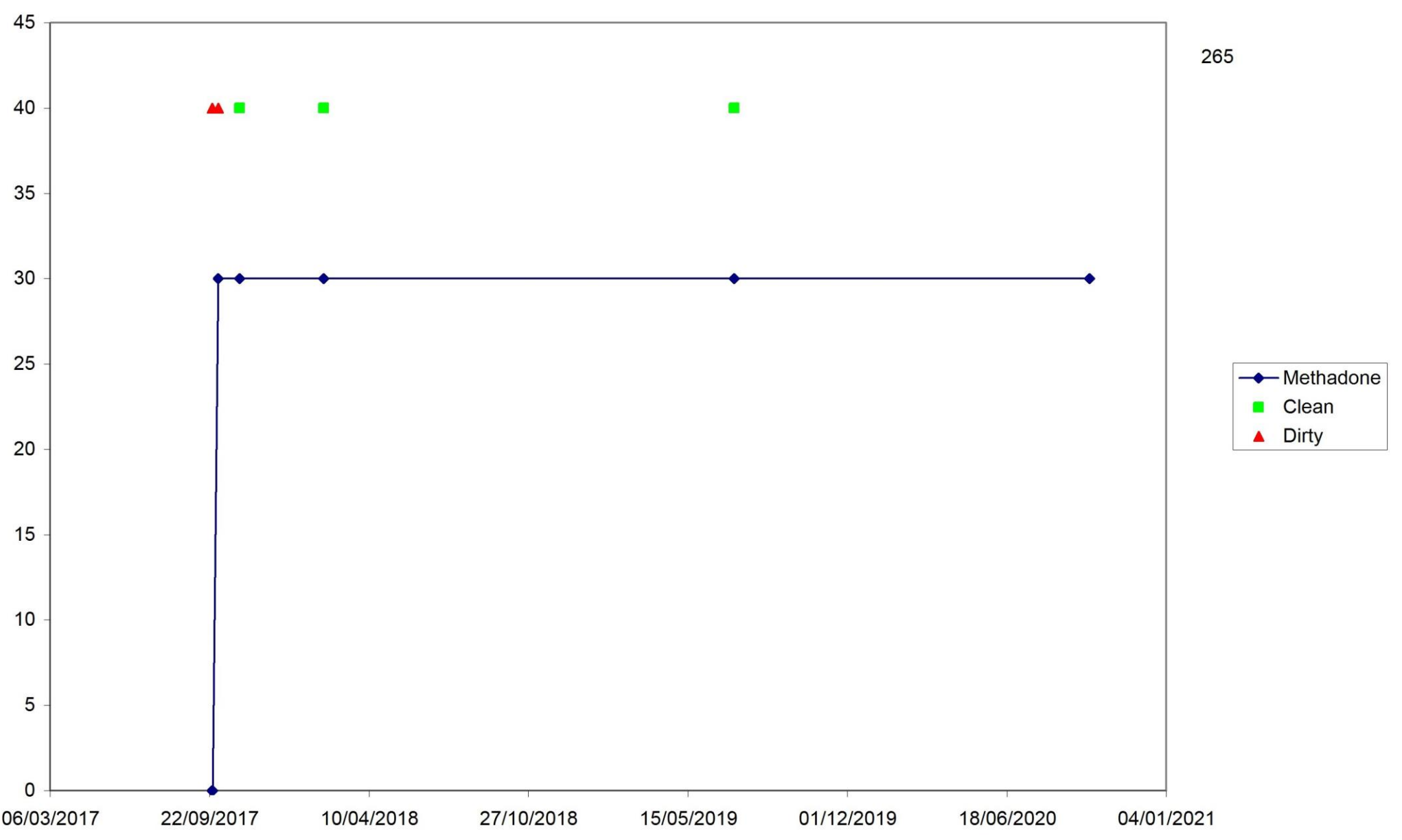


Figure 3: pattern of patients who stayed in treatment

References

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Declaration

I declare that no conflict of interest exists

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