

## **Harm Reduction in Scotland**

A long, long time ago a Friend brought a Concern to his local meeting. This Concern was accepted by Area Meeting and then was tested at Meeting for Sufferings where unity was elusive. Cornwall Area Meeting continues to carry the Concern for the decriminalisation of the possession of all drugs for personal use. The Concern is founded within the harm that the prohibition of drugs creates: it exacerbates the social exclusion of vulnerable individuals; it presents a large-scale contemporary problem which affects the lives of whole communities locally, nationally and globally; it ensures the production and supply of drugs is in the hands of organised crime and so is associated with other areas of criminal activity such as human trafficking, the arms trade, prostitution, gambling, pornography and money laundering.

The Scottish government has recently agreed to legalise consumption rooms where drug users can inject drugs in a safe and supervised environment. This is accepted as the best method to reduce the very large numbers of drug related deaths in Scotland. The consumption rooms provide a compassionate, non-judgemental and supportive environment and within such an environment people are more likely to engage with staff and access services. The consumption rooms are a significant component of an overall aspirational risk reduction strategy to improve the health and social care of people using drugs problematically. The focus of a risk reduction strategy is to gain the trust of service users and to become a credible source of information. Good generic support includes needle exchange, improved access to treatment, substitution prescribing, advice and information, generic health advice, access to housing and social care. An important part of the strategy is the decriminalisation of the possession of all drugs.

The aspiration for decriminalisation draws on the model used in Portugal where in 2001 a paradigm shift towards the health and well-being of the drug user was implemented: the whole administration addressing drug use moved under the healthcare sphere with a consistent and coherent policy. In Portugal, a decriminalisation approach coupled with investment and resourcing of harm reduction and treatment services has had a positive impact on both individual drug users and society as a whole. The implementation of a health-based system included a change of culture and belief as well as a change of policy.

The outcomes in Portugal were rigorously monitored by the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. Decriminalisation had little or no impact upon prevalence - which has fluctuated in Portugal since 2001 in common with the rest of Europe<sup>1</sup>. Evidence showed that decriminalisation did appear to direct more drug users into treatment, reduce criminal justice costs and shield many drug users from the impact of a criminal conviction<sup>2</sup>. Hughes and Stevens<sup>3</sup> conducted a study of evidence regarded decriminalisation of the possession of all drugs in Portugal and concluded that evidence shows: small increases in reported illicit drug use among adults; reduced illicit drug use among problematic drug users and adolescents (since 2003); increased uptake of drug treatment; a reduced burden of drug offenders on the criminal justice system; and a reduction in opiate-related deaths and infectious diseases.

---

<sup>1</sup> A range of international studies conclude there is little or no relationship between the legal status of drug use of a country and the rate of drug use within it. Removing penalties for drug use does not result in an increase in overall drug use. It is accepted by many analysts that the prevalence of drug use tends to rise and fall in line with broader cultural, social or economic trends.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes, C. & Stevens, A. (2010) What Can We Learn From The Portuguese Decriminalisation of Illicit Drugs? *British Journal of Criminology*, 50, p, 999-1022

<sup>3</sup> Hughes, C. & Stevens, A. (2010) What Can We Learn From The Portuguese Decriminalisation of Illicit Drugs? *British Journal of Criminology*, 50, p, 999-1022

Professor Alex Stevens, notably, states:

*We need, though, to be looking beyond prevalence and redefine "the drug problem" as more than just how many people use drugs. measuring the effectiveness of drug policy requires a far broader range of indicators that include public health, crime, civil rights, community safety, international development and conflict. In Portugal drug related deaths have fallen, HIV, AIDS, Hep C, Hep B and TB rates have fallen. Young people (or any person) are not criminalised or stigmatised or imprisoned for the recreational use of any drug. Every parent may worry about their child taking drugs but evidence from Portugal and elsewhere shows that decriminalisation does not increase the likelihood risk of them taking drugs. It does, however, decrease the risk of harm if they do.*

A less tangible benefit is that drug use became less stigmatised. Dr. Joao Goulao, the architect of Portugal's decriminalisation policy stated,

*The biggest effect has been to allow the stigma of drug addiction to fall, to let people speak clearly and to pursue professional help without fear.*

Quakers in Criminal Justice met in February 2019 to discuss, learn and discern matters relating to drug policy. The subject of the conference was the decriminalisation of the possession of drug use. Invited speakers included Professor Alex Stevens and Danny Kushlick from *Transform*<sup>4</sup>. Workshops and discussions were facilitated throughout the weekend. The conference concluded having discerned the following Minute:

*We feel strongly that the present drug policy causes harm as it is based on the criminalisation of people who use illegal drugs. We learnt that criminalisation is ineffective in reducing illegal drug use and that systems to control drugs make no impact upon prevalence.*

*We understand that doing nothing is to condone the status quo and the harm caused by the current policy. Quakers in Criminal Justice understand that legal regulation will provide a*

---

<sup>4</sup> Transform is an organisation which works to promote drug policy reform.

*greater protection to people who use drugs. We need a health-based system which encompasses harm reduction, social care and community resilience.*

*We consider that drug problems must be addressed alongside the problems caused by an unjust and unequal society. We believe it would be beneficial to have a regulated and licenced supply of all drugs. Public education is essential to convey that legal regulation would safeguard people who use drugs and the wider society as a whole - preventing deaths, drug related crime and reducing the involvement of organised crime.*

*We appreciate the deepening of this subject and we encourage Friends to explore how we can influence public opinion and political decision making. Friends can be in touch with the Quaker Decriminalisation Network about actions that can be taken.*

*This is a moral issue and Friends can be a force for change. We call upon Quakers in Britain to gain clarity on how to end the 'war on drugs'.*

The Quakers in Criminal Justice conference was inspirational and uplifting. We are now once more uplifted by the news from Scotland. We hope for the transition to a compassionate and humane UK drugs policy which is founded in truth, justice and equality.