

Preventing and treating heroin overdose

1. Introduction: the Villa Maraini Foundation programme



The Villa Maraini Foundation, part of the Italian Red Cross, offers a number of facilities and services for the care and rehabilitation of people who have become dependent on drugs. Services include a night centre for the homeless, a unit offering support to drug users infected with HIV/AIDS, a training centre for staff and an emergency unit which runs "street units", that is, mobile units often staffed by former drug users who are trained to contact and assist drug users in the places where they use drugs: in the streets, in poor neighbourhoods, in railway stations, tunnels, waste ground, etc.

In 1976 the Italian Red Cross inaugurated the Villa Maraini Foundation with the aim of providing a safe haven for individuals with problematic drug use. In agreement with the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality) VMF aimed in particular at implementing the notion of equal right to health treatment, by reaching out to the most vulnerable drug users, by offering its services even in areas of high drug trafficking and drug use, and by avoiding wait-and-see policies that ultimately penalize those in the greatest need of help. In the words of VMF Founding President, Dr Massimo Barra: "As long as the addict is alive there is hope of improvement. When the addict dies hope dies with him".

In its 30 plus years, the Foundation has grown from a small centre assisting around five persons a day to providing services to 800 drug users per day and more than 3,000 patients and their families a year. The main focus is to build trust with drug users, in the knowledge that therapies will not help unless they follow a process in which the drug user believes.

Dr Barra comments: "If we consider individuals in their different phases of life, we can realize that every individual is quite different from the next and that even differences can be found in the same individual. For this reason, treatment and dependence therapies have to be tailored towards the real and changing needs of a particular individual. Therapies have to be shaped for individual needs and not vice-versa...".

The Villa Maraini is now recognized as the Italian Red Cross Agency on Drug Abuse and has become one of the world's leading centres in substance abuse treatment and prevention, serving as a reference both within the Red Cross Red Crescent and externally. It serves as a safe centre for those in need, working to mitigate the stigma and potential public health consequences of the spread of transmissible diseases as well as offering drug rehabilitation programmes.