

English version

***" A MORE HUMAN APPROACH TO DRUG
USERS "***

***Public hearing at the Plenary Meeting of
the Social, Health and Family Committee
of the Parliamentary Assembly of the
Council of Europe***

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Distinguished Members of the Committee,
first let me thank you for this opportunity
to exchange views on the role of public
health policies in the fight against the drugs
problem.

In my work as a physician and at the Villa
Maraini treatment centre in Rome, that I
have founded almost 30 years ago and that is
now one of the biggest anti-drug centres in
Italy, I have been witness to the ravages
that drug addiction can cause on individuals
and the communities within which they live. I

have treated over 30,000 drug addicts and have seen what happens when societies give up on addicts to embrace drug policies based mainly on repression and criminalisation of the victims. The result is stigmatization of the drug user and the dismissal of the problems that drug use brings: spread of disease, loss of life, crime, and a loss of compassion for one's fellow man.

We must all recognize the right of addicts to participate fully in society and give them a chance to make a healthy choice.

We have seen that the stigmatization of drug users leaves people carrying blood-borne diseases such as HIV/AIDS untreated. If you neglect the victims of addiction this can only lead down a path of more suffering and less control over the drug phenomenon. It goes without saying that this harm is not limited to the drug users themselves but also harms the societies in which they live.

My experience tells me that addicts need treatment to help them return into the societal fold and to stop the spread of

disease. And this is also the mission that the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies has pursued - that is, to spread the light of science and the warmth of human sympathy to humanity's most marginalized members. Under this motto, that has been used for the first time in Paris in 1919 by the founders of the League of Red Cross Societies, the Movement, which I have been involved with since the age of eight, has always directed its action in favour of vulnerable people; particularly in the most obscure, stigmatised

corners of our society, where drug users are obliged to live.

Drug policies that do not include public health measures signal society's denial of the basic compassion and humanity that bonds people together. It also means that society is left with very little chance of reducing the drug problem.

It is clear, then, that a public health approach is needed when combating drug addiction. Only through a combination of substitution treatment, especially methadone

maintenance, psychotherapy, counselling, needle-exchange programme and drug control measures can we ever hope to effectively overcome the challenge posed by drug addiction.

Every drug user is different from the others, and even from himself, if we consider his timeline. Each drug user needs a specific intervention, that has to be related to his specific situation in a given moment of his life. It is the interest of any State to make such kind of intervention easily

available. Unfortunately, this does not happen in many parts of the world, due the attitude of many Governments, that I would not hesitate to define masochistic or, in any case, against the interests of their citizens.

We have seen that public health measures have a positive effect on the situation of the addicts but also on security and economic development of the community at large. Unfortunately especially developing or transition countries have difficulty implementing these measures and as a result

a HIV/Aids epidemic is developing in Eastern Europe, Russia and Asia.

In response to the spread of HIV/Aids, the Red Cross established the European Network on HIV/AIDS (ERNA), which develops comprehensive programmes to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic and provide long-needed care for drug users. Through this programme, we are able to reach out to drug users who have long been stigmatized and abandoned by repressive drug policies.

My experience as one of the founders of ERNA shows that there is a need of sharing good practices; in fact this is vital. But this sharing cannot be efficient as long as there is no framework to support the measures we need to implement. With the huge challenges that society faces when it comes to drug addiction and especially the fast spreading Aids epidemic, you need more than only ad hoc practices. You need a framework that clearly states which health principles and practices should form the basis of every drug policy. A legal ground to allow society

to evolve and begin dealing with the reality of the current drug situation.

It is not ideological to promote public health policies but it is a choice of life and that is why the Red Cross with its founding principle of neutrality uses its power of humanity to implement these practices throughout the world, regardless of health conditions, religion or wealth. And this is also one of the reasons for the Red Cross to publish a ground-breaking report on Harm

Reduction in 2003, that you can find on the Federation website.

The draft document put forward by The Senlis Council addresses the dire need for a legal framework through which countries can protect their commitment to the right to health in the context of drug abuse. It is a document that clearly and plainly states support for a compassionate drug policy and recognizes that the only way to effectively deal with drug addiction is to treat drug addicts with compassion and care.

This is an opportunity for Europe to send a clear signal to those countries in Central Asia, Eastern Europe, Russia and Africa, who are in desperate need of effective solutions to their drug and HIV/AIDS crises. Europe should speak with one voice to the international community and firmly state that the inclusion of principles of rationality, compassion and care in national drug policies is legal, effective and safe.

It is my belief that these principles express what European countries now accept

as true: that public health-based drug policies must play a part in Europe's - and the international community's response to drugs and drug addiction. It is our duty to help those who cannot overcome their addiction on their own by stating clearly that we, as fellow members of humanity, are willing to help.

Thank you.

Massimo Barra