

NEWS RELEASE
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Drug use and HIV/AIDS:

Think tank warns of HIV/AIDS time bomb in Afghanistan

Addiction Treatment Advocacy Initiative launched for Afghan drug users

Users must not be marginalised if AIDS threat to be avoided, Red Cross Doctor says

KABUL – The Senlis Council, an international drug policy think tank, warned on World AIDS Day that HIV/AIDS could spread into an uncontrollable epidemic if Afghanistan does not provide urgent treatment programmes for the growing number of injecting drug users in the country.

“Afghanistan is sitting on a ticking HIV time bomb,” said Emmanuel Reinert, Executive Director of The Senlis Council, speaking from Kabul.

The Council said that with nearly one million drug users in Afghanistan, about 7000 of who inject drugs, but with few treatment facilities, all the ingredients are present in Afghanistan for a potential HIV epidemic. But the virus can still be contained if the right measures are taken now

“It will be too late if we let an epidemic take root before taking action,” said Reinert. “We can prevent it if we move now – before it starts.”

Injecting drugs is one of the main causes of the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region through the sharing of contaminated needles. The virus is then spread into the wider community through sexual relations. According to the latest UNAIDS Report, *Epidemic Update 2005*, many of Afghanistan’s closest neighbours have alarmingly high rates of HIV prevalence originating from drug use – in Russia, for example, over 80% of registered HIV cases are found in injecting drug users; in China, 43%.

HIV/AIDS epidemics are also often fuelled by an overlap between injecting drug use and commercial sex. Neighbouring Uzbekistan has experienced a 200-fold increase in HIV cases in the last five years.

In many countries in the region, drug users have been given little or no access to simple treatment facilities which can save lives – one of the reasons why the prevalence of the epidemic has risen so high.

“The same mistakes must not be repeated in Afghanistan,” said Dr Massimo Barra, Chairman of the Development Commission of the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. “Simple measures, such as clean needle exchange and substitution treatment, are effective ways with which to fight the spread of this terrible disease.”

Many Afghans started injecting heroin for the first time as refugees in Pakistan and Iran, where this method of administration is common. They are now returning to their homeland and could be infected with the virus without being aware of it.

“A treatment and prevention campaign is urgently needed to help and advise drug users if Afghanistan is to thwart this looming threat in time,” Dr Barra continued. “Users must not be marginalised.”

To provide information on and support for effective drug addiction treatment programmes, The Senlis Council is launching an Addiction Treatment Advocacy Initiative at the *Kabul Symposium on Addiction Treatment: Responding to the Drug Crisis in Afghanistan*, to be held on Saturday 3 December in Kabul.

“Innovative solutions are already being used in Europe,” said Reinert. “Over the past 20 years European countries have developed pragmatic and effective responses to their drug problems. The international community must assist Afghanistan to develop similar responses if a major HIV crisis is to be avoided.”

The Symposium will aim to generate and informed debate on measures to address the links between drug use and health in Afghanistan.

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About the Senlis Council

The Senlis Council, established in 2002, is an international drug policy think tank which gathers expertise and facilitates new initiatives on global drug policy. The Council convenes politicians, high profile academics, independent experts and Non-Governmental Organisations. It aims to work as the dialogue partner with senior policy-makers at both the national and international level in order to foster high-level exchanges and new ideas on integrated drug policies.

For more information on the work of the Senlis Council, please visit www.senliscouncil.net