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Afghan Red Crescent, Italian Red Cross and Senlis Council open drug addiction care and treatment centre in Kabul

"In face of growing levels of addiction, it is vital to address drug addiction in Afghanistan," Italian Red Cross President warns

New Kabul drug addiction centre modelled on successful treatment centre in Rome

KABUL – A new drug addiction care and treatment centre was opened today in Kabul. The *"Nawai Zwand" (New Beginning) Care and Treatment Centre for Drug Addiction* is a joint project of the Italian Red Cross, the Afghan Red Crescent and The Senlis Council's Afghan agency, Senlis Afghanistan. The centre will address the country's growing drug addiction problem, which could also be the cause of a widespread HIV/AIDS epidemic in the country in coming years.

A 2006 UN report estimates that the total number of drug users in Afghanistan has now reached nearly 1 million - almost 4% of the total population. This is in part due to an influx of returning refugees from neighbouring countries, Pakistan and Iran, where levels of drug use have soared in recent years.

"Drug addiction is an increasingly worrying issue in Afghanistan and we hope that the treatment centre will contribute to helping Afghanistan deal with this growing problem," said Norine MacDonald QC, Founding President of The Senlis Council. "In his treatment centre in Rome, Dr Massimo Barra has proven that it is possible to tackle the difficult issue of drug addiction with success, and it is his model that the Kabul Centre has been based on."

The Villa Maraini Therapeutic Community, founded by Dr Barra in Rome thirty years ago treats over 700 drug users a day. The Kabul centre will add to other drug-addiction services already operational in the city and aims to help the Afghan government and the United Nations to meet the growing challenge of drug addiction in the country. A group of Doctors, nurses and social workers from the Afghan Red Crescent received training at Villa Maraini in December 2006. It is planned that a team from Villa Maraini will visit Kabul to help tailor the Kabul centre to fit the particular needs of the city.

"In over 30 years of experience in helping drug users, I have found that understanding and compassion for their suffering is a very effective way of helping drug users to cope with their addiction," said Dr Barra. "Too often the stigma associated with drug use stops addicts from even seeking the attention they so desperately need. At Villa Maraini we try to understand people and help them to cope with the many difficulties in life."

Injecting drug use – a new threat in Afghanistan

In addition to the problems associated with addiction, injecting drug use represents an important HIV threat to Afghanistan.

"Many of the returnee refugees are now injecting heroin and this poses a major threat in terms of HIV/AIDS transmission," said MacDonald. "Historically, Afghanistan does not have a tradition of heroin use, nor of injecting drugs."

"Sharing needles during drug injection is a sure-fire way of transmitting the HIV virus," said Dr Barra. "There is a desperate need for addiction treatment in Afghanistan if we want to pre-empt the impending HIV crisis. The Red Cross and Red Crescent have a humanitarian mission to care for the most vulnerable groups. In addition to this, Afghanistan is an extremely vulnerable country and as such should be given special attention."

Over the past two years, Senlis field workers have found evidence of growing levels of heroin injection in Kabul, Herat, Lashkar Gar (Helmand) and Kandahar city.

"These urban areas where returning refugees seek work could be the breeding ground for an AIDS epidemic in Afghanistan," said MacDonald.

Afghanistan is sitting on an HIV time-bomb

Lessons can be learned about forestalling an HIV/AIDS crisis from neighbouring countries: Iran has experienced a sharp rise in injection drug use in recent years with HIV infections increasing 10 fold between 1999 and 2005, with drug users making up the large majority of new infections. In Uzbekistan, intravenous drug use has increased almost 10 fold in the last ten years, which has led to a 200 fold increase in HIV/Aids cases.

"If we act quickly we can stop an HIV/AIDS crisis happening in Afghanistan. If not, we will be facing a widespread epidemic," said Ms Fatima Gailani, President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society. "We hope that this treatment centre will not only alleviate the suffering of drug addicts in Kabul, but that it will also stop the HIV crisis that is looming over Afghanistan in its tracks."

Simple measures, such as clean needle exchange and methadone substitution treatment are also effective, cost-efficient approaches used at Villa Maraini to combat the current drug problem in terms of arresting the spread of the deadly HIV virus.

“Methadone substitution treatment has proven highly effective at Villa Maraini in Rome,” said Dr Barra.

Link to UNODC Drug Use Survey in Afghanistan:

http://www.unodc.org/pdf/afg/publications/afghanistan_drug_use_survey_2005.pdf

The Senlis Council is an international policy think tank with offices in Kabul, London, Paris and Brussels. The Council’s work encompasses foreign policy, security, development and counter-narcotics policies and aims to provide innovative analysis and proposals within these areas. The extensive programme currently underway in Afghanistan focuses on global policy development in conjunction with field research to investigate the relationships between counter-narcotics, military, and development policies and their consequences on Afghanistan’s reconstruction efforts. Senlis Afghanistan has field offices in the Afghan cities of Lashkar Gah and Kandahar.

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