

CND Vienna

Side event: humanitarian approach to address synthetic drugs threats

Thank you Berenice,

the threat posed by so called synthetic drugs is one of the most urgent public health crises of our time. The work led by the US on the Global Alliance to address Synthetic Drugs, was a spotlight in the International community. Synthetic drugs are rapidly produced, highly potent, and easily trafficked, overwhelming health systems and leading to unprecedented levels of overdoses and social harm.

This crisis demands an urgent and coordinated response, to avoid finding ourselves unprepared, as happened in the United States. This response must prioritize health and harm reduction over punitive approaches. History has shown that a criminal justice-led response does not solve the problem. Instead, it often exacerbates it, pushing people further into marginalization and limiting their access to care.

To address the synthetic drug crisis, we must adopt a **humanitarian approach** centered on three key priorities:

1. Saving Lives Through Harm Reduction and Overdose Prevention

Access to harm reduction services must be expanded. It is vital to provide naloxone to reverse overdoses, and establish protocols to manage critical cases of fentanyl.

2. Ensuring Access to Treatment Without Stigma

People struggling with substance use disorders need easy access to evidence-based treatment options. Yet, in many parts of the world, these services remain scarce, expensive, or restricted by punitive policies.

3. Enhancing Alternative Approaches

The criminalization of drug use continues to fuel cycles of incarceration, violence, and exclusion. Countries that have shifted from punitive to health-centered approaches have seen reductions in drug-related deaths, crime, and the burden on prison systems. Prisons are pathological and pathogenic. It is in the interest of every country to have people with drug disorders under a treatment regime, instead of judicial regime.

In Rome at the Villa Maraini Foundation we meet over 700 people a day, and provide comprehensive drug treatment services in Rome. Among these, the Emergency Unit operates 24/7; as a specific service to address all drug related emergencies in the Metropolitan area of Rome. A dedicated hotline allows law enforcement and courts to report problems and to ask the intervention of our team, 1 medical doctor, 1 peer and 1 Red Cross volunteer. Daily requests come from Police stations, Courts and hospitals for assistance to people in police custody, under arrest or hospitalized. Our team is trained to respond also to family crises, and cases of street violence.

On the other hand we offer counselling to inmates, assessing their eligibility for Alternative Measures to Detention and supporting their recovery journey. Suitable candidates can access therapeutic community programs paid by National Health Service. We hosted over 800 people in the last 20 years; these spent more than 200.000 days in our treatment center instead of prison. The experience of Villa Maraini demonstrates that Law Enforcement can be powerful agents of change, if well influenced by health workers. And the next step will be implementing Deflection programs, and making it possible for police to connect People with Drug Problems to health services instead of the criminal justice system. We are working on an MoU with the Chief of Police of Rome, as a crucial step forward.

Thank you

Massimo Barra
Chair of the RCRC Partnership on Substance Abuse