

Opus divinum



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A patient told me this story when she came to our Center: a year ago she had a heart operation. One Friday morning she had a cardiac appointment at the hospital and she went accompanied by her partner. They were both patients of the Center for Prevention and Treatment of Addiction of Illicit Drugs. Her medication was methadone, his was buprenorphine.

The visit at the cardiologist took a long time and they arrived at the drug treatment center a little late. The time for his buprenorphine pick up was too late by 10 minutes, while the time for the pick up of her methadone was fine (still 20 minutes left). This is because at the center the official timetable for delivering medications was half an hour less for buprenorphine than for methadone. She had the opportunity to have her daily dose of methadone and get two take home doses for the weekend, while he got no daily dose of buprenorphine and no take home doses for the weekend. Can you imagine this?!

On that day they had been abstinent from all illicit drugs and alcohol for quite a long time. After three days, on the Monday, they went to the center again. She got her daily dose of medication, while he was refused. The reason? The drug treatment center records showed that he hadn't taken his buprenorphine medication for three days and for the personnel this was sufficient reason that the patient first be seen by the doctor who would decide about the dose or regime of getting the medication. He insisted via a urine sample to show that he was drug free - because on the previous Friday afternoon he succeeded in buying buprenorphine on the black market. But the nurse would not give him his buprenorphine. He had to come back next day when his doctor would be free to talk to him ...

Where are their patient rights, their human rights? Rules regarding medicine should be to help people and not to punish them. Doctor's work has to be *opus divinum* – the work of God. Regulations that result in patients being penalised at a drug treatment center are bad - really bad. Regardless of the reason! Science shows that punishment applied in the hope of effecting change in human behaviour brings about only very small and temporary results. It may not be instant, but lasting and long term change can be achieved by listening, understanding and acceptance.

For this reason those who are working with people who use drugs should never use policies as punishment and destroy the dignity and health of human beings. Regulations and laws should be used only for helping people to live better lives – to do *opus divinum*