



LETTERS

NEW UK DRUG STRATEGY

Is the UK's 2017 drug strategy fit for purpose?

Chris Ford *clinical director*¹, David Nutt *chair*², Niamh Eastwood *executive director*³, Deborah Gold *chief executive*⁴, John Jolly *chief executive*⁵, Fionnuala Murphy *head of advocacy*⁶, Kate Halliday *executive director*⁷, Jamie Bridge *senior policy and operations manager*⁸

¹International Doctors for Healthier Drug Policies, London NW1 0JH, UK; ²Drug Science, London SW8 1GB, UK; ³Release, London EC1V 2NJ, UK; ⁴National AIDS Trust, London EC1V 9FR, UK; ⁵Blenheim CDP, London SW8 2JU, UK; ⁶Harm Reduction International, London SE1 6LN, UK; ⁷Substance Misuse Management Good Practice (SMMGP), Box 200, London SW19 1LJ, UK; ⁸International Drug Policy Consortium, London EC1V 2NJ, UK

The UK government has published its 2017 drug strategy,^{1,2} and we are greatly concerned at the lack of focus on harm reduction—an evidence based response that protects people and saves lives—at a time when drug related deaths are the highest on record. The government acknowledges in the strategy that the rise in drug related deaths is “dramatic and tragic” but proposes no concrete action plan to reduce them.

Heroin and morphine deaths rose by 109% in England and Wales between 2012 and 2016.³ Harm reduction initiatives such as opioid substitution treatment and needle and syringe programmes are only mentioned fleetingly in the strategy, and others such as drug consumption rooms and heroin assisted treatment are completely absent.

Public health spending, including for drug services, has already been reduced.⁴ Analysis shows that drug treatment faces a further £22m (€25m; \$30m) of cuts by the end of 2017-18.⁵ Without funding, drug services will not be able to function effectively.

The government has dismissed decriminalisation, yet the World Health Organization and other UN agencies have called for the end of criminal sanctions for possession and use of drugs, recognising that criminalisation creates barriers for those needing treatment and increases health harms.

People who misuse drugs are often vulnerable and marginalised. This new strategy simply does not even begin to support them or to reduce drug related deaths. We call on the government to

implement the recommendations of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs to tackle opiate related deaths. These include optimal prescribing of opioid substitution treatment, easier access to naloxone, a national heroin assisted treatment programme, and implementation of drug consumption rooms where needed.⁶ In addition, local authorities should be mandated to provide drug treatment services by law.

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Full response at: <http://www.bmj.com/content/358/bmj.j3643/rr-0>.

- 1 Winstock AR, Eastwood N, Stevens A. A new drug strategy for the UK. *BMJ* 2017;358:j3643. doi:10.1136/bmj.j3643 pmid:28774872.
- 2 HM Government. 2017 drug strategy. July 2017 https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/628148/Drug_strategy_2017.PDF
- 3 Office for National Statistics. Deaths related to drug poisoning in England and Wales: 2016 registrations. 2017. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/bulletins/deathsrelatedtodrugpoisoninginenglandandwales/2016registrations>
- 4 The King's Fund. Big cuts planned to public health budgets. 2017. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/press/press-releases/big-cuts-planned-public-health-budgets>
- 5 The King's Fund. Chickens coming home to roost: local government public health budgets for 2017-18. 2017. <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/blog/2017/07/local-government-public-health-budgets-2017-18>
- 6 Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. Reducing opioid related deaths in the UK. 2016. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/576560/ACMD-Drug-Related-Deaths-Report-161212.pdf

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