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Statement in Support of the Report of the Global Commission on Drugs

As a group of physicians who are very familiar with drug dependency, its treatments and related health problems, the International Doctors for Healthy Drug Policies (IDHDP) supports the mission of the Global Commission on Drug Policy to bring to the international level an informed, science-based discussion about humane and effective ways to reduce the harm caused by drugs to people and societies.

IDHDP further endorses the principles and recommendations of the recently released report by the Global Commission on Drugs Policy particularly in calling for the need to “offer a wide and easily accessible range of options for treatment and care of drug dependence, including substitution and heroin-assisted treatment, with special attention to those most at risk, including those in prisons and other custodial settings.” Evidence-based drug substitution treatments such as methadone and buprenorphine have long been found to be the most effective treatments in reducing illicit drug use, preventing the spread of HIV, as well as helping to prevent drug overdose deaths. Methadone and buprenorphine treatment have been endorsed by the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). WHO has included methadone and buprenorphine on its Essential Medications List.

Rigorous controlled trials of heroin assisted treatment in six countries (Switzerland, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain, Canada and the United Kingdom) over the last 15 years have shown it to be very effective in treating some difficult to reach drug users, many of whom cannot or will not access other treatments or have not stabilized on methadone or buprenorphine. It produces similar results to other substitution treatments in terms of improvements in health and well-being reducing death, helping individuals to stabilize both physically and psychologically, reduces the harms of illicit drugs to individuals, their family, their community and society and reduces crime. While heroin assisted treatment is more expensive than treatment with methadone or buprenorphine, the savings in health and social costs are estimated to be two times the cost of the treatment.

All of these treatments are effective, safe and cost effective. Along with preventing deaths and diseases, the benefits include improvements in patients’ physical and mental health and social functioning. Methadone and buprenorphine treatment are more effective in attracting and retaining heroin dependent people than any other forms of treatment, but drug treatment is often poorly funded with only a small percentage of injecting drug users globally having access to drug treatment, harm reduction services, or anti-retroviral treatments. Although substitution treatment is available in more than 70 countries worldwide, most countries are not nearly meeting the demand for treatment and many have

one poorly funded project with intermittent supplies. To make a real impact on drug problems, good evidence-based consistent treatment must be provided to all who need it.

Further, as stated in the Global Commission's report, national drug and AIDS strategies should include scaling up evidence-based drug dependence treatment services that are not one size fits all. Since most of the people who use drugs are not in treatment, the range of services should also include harm reduction services such as the provision of clean needles, condoms, and overdose prevention to further help protect drug injectors, their sex partners and the general population against the spread of HIV and hepatitis and death.

In summary, we support the Global Commission on Drug Policy's call for nations to deal with the matter of drug dependency with compassion and grounded in evidence-based healthcare and human rights. We've seen from examples all over the world that where imprisonment and forced treatment are the only or predominant options given to many drug dependent people, HIV epidemics continue to grow. And we've seen where the opposite has occurred, in countries that have abandoned punitive and restrictive approaches in favor of pragmatic, humane policy which includes scaling up substitution treatment and harm reduction services resulting in reduced infections, lives saved and prevented generalized epidemics. Which choice to make is clear.

Dr. Chris Ford
Medical Director
International Doctors for Healthy Drug Policies
+ 442073286164
+ 447939000254
Chris.Ford@idhdp.com

International Doctors for Healthy Drug Policies (IDHDP) is a network for medical doctors to share expertise and good practice in reducing the health, social and economic harms of people who use drugs and, with them at the centre. We represent doctors who treat drug addiction from more than 35 countries worldwide.

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