

Why doctors should read, 'A Quiet Revolution: Drug Decriminalisation Policies in Practice Across the Globe' a report examining why decriminalisation of drug possession is an important step in reforming the drug laws.

[A review by Dr. Chris Ford](#)

Release, the UK's national centre of expertise on drugs and drugs laws, has launched a new report, 'A Quiet Revolution: Drug Decriminalisation Policies in Practice Across the Globe' which examines the efficacy of policies in different countries that have adopted some form of decriminalisation of drug use and/ or possession. Release has been promoting decriminalisation of drug possession for some time as a policy option in the UK and now takes a look at what other countries have been doing and how adopting decriminalisation policies have impacted drug prevalence rates within those jurisdictions. Other organisations, including the Open Society Foundations, have done excellent work on analysing specific countries that have adopted a non-criminal approach to drug use, and their papers and other academic studies were the building blocks of this report. You can read Niamh Eastwood's full blog regarding this report on [Open Society Foundation website](#).

The definition that has been applied by Release to decriminalisation is, "the removal of criminal sanctions for personal drug possession or use offences, with the optional application of civil penalties such as a fine or referral to treatment, or a decision not to take any formal action." The report focuses on the question of whether these decriminalisation measures have led to an increase in drug use. Overwhelmingly, in those countries that had adopted effective models, the answer was no, it did not. The report further questions why, then, do so many countries pursue a harsh and costly criminal approach to drug possession offences and make criminals out of hundreds of thousands (probably millions) of people instead of providing a health led system including cost effective harm reduction and treatment interventions, such as opiate substitute treatment (OST), needle and syringe programmes and overdose prevention and education?

We know from countries such as Portugal and Switzerland that to make drug policy reform work what is needed is a complete package including, perhaps for us the most important, easy access to treatment at all levels; harm reduction, OST, abstinence based treatment; and the four pillar approach adopted by Switzerland - policing, prevention of drug use, treatment of drug use, and harm reduction. I believe this is an important step and is a pragmatic and evidence based approach, which reduces the harms to individuals and communities and can lead to significant cost benefits for the State.

Criminalisation of individuals can impact them for the rest of their lives, affecting employment and education, not to mention their health and welfare. It stigmatises people and can push them further into the margins of society. As doctors, many of us may not have thought much about decriminalisation and its potential to improve the health and overall well-being of people who use drugs, but even for those of us who have, read this report: it is an eye opener. I recommend that you read this report and then as a group lets discuss whether IDHDP should firstly make a statement and secondly, talk about whether we agree with Release's call that decriminalisation is the first step in reform of our drug laws.

Click on the title to access the full report:

['A Quiet Revolution: Drug Decriminalisation Policies in Practice Across the Globe'](#)