

Global Commission on Drug Policy releases report on Hepatitis C: “...the hidden epidemic”

Friday, 31 May 2013, Geneva, Switzerland – On 30 May, the Global Commission on Drug Policy released the report ‘The Negative Impact of the War on Drugs on Public Health: the hidden Hepatitis C epidemic’ during a press conference in Geneva, Switzerland.

Worldwide, approximately 10 million out of the 16 million people who inject drugs are affected by Hepatitis C and the numbers are growing fast. This population is heavily affected because the virus is highly infectious and is transmitted by blood-to-blood contact.

Hepatitis C can be cured but testing and access to treatment remains low because it is very expensive. Additional impediments to testing and treatment access by people who inject drugs include criminalization and systematic discrimination.

Recent epidemiological statistics show that in East and Southeast Asia 2.6 million people who inject drugs are infected, closely followed by Eastern Europe, with an infection rate estimated in 2.3 million.

Michel Kazatchkine, member of the Global Commission on Drug Policy and UN Special Envoy on HIV/AIDS in Eastern Europe and Asia, said that Hepatitis C is “one of the most grossly miscalculated diseases by governments on the planet”. Unfortunately, according to Kazatchkine, “only a handful of countries can show significant decline in new infections of hepatitis C among people who inject drugs”.

The report offers 11 recommendations. Among them the call on governments to acknowledge the importance of the hepatitis C epidemic and the impact it has on people’s lives, especially those who use drugs. The report emphasizes the importance of reviewing and reforming existing drug policies that promote mass incarceration and compulsory treatment and impose public health measures that prevent people who use drugs from accessing services and care. It also highlights the importance of making treatment financially viable and ensuring that there are mechanisms in place, which will provide access to quality data.

Bertrand Audoin, the Executive Director of the International AIDS Society said “This huge unrecognized epidemic of hepatitis C along with HIV which causes the untold suffering for millions of people - is largely avoidable. Ending the criminalization and the unacceptable targeting and incarceration of people who inject drugs are fundamental requirements to avert this huge public health disaster.”

The International AIDS Society (IAS) and the Global Commission on Drug Policy are organizing a ‘High Level Panel on Drug Policies and Public Health’ on 30 June 2013, in Kuala Lumpur, prior to the 7th IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention (IAS 2013) and a Special Session on ‘Evidence-Based Drug Policies for an Effective HIV Response’ on 1 July 2013 at 13.00, as part of the IAS 2013 Programme.

For more information on the report please contact Mara.Nakagawa-Harwood@iasociety.org.

About the IAS

The International AIDS Society (IAS) is the world's leading independent association of HIV professionals, with over 16,000 members from more than 196 countries working at all levels of the global response to AIDS. The IAS members include researchers from all disciplines, clinicians, public health and community practitioners on the frontlines of the epidemic, as well as policy and programme planners.

The IAS is lead organizer of the IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention, which will be held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 30 June – 3 July 2013 and custodian of the biennial International AIDS Conference, which will be held in Melbourne, Australia, 20-25 July 2014.

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