

Ahead of International AIDS Conference, health experts call for scientifically-based drug policies

Ahead of the International AIDS Conference, scheduled to kick off 18 July 2010, health experts on Monday called for a rethinking of international drug policies to incorporate greater scientific evidence and increase access to HIV prevention, treatment and care, the Associated Press reports (6/28).

"Many of us in AIDS research and care confront the devastating impacts of misguided drug policies every day," International AIDS Society (IAS) President Julio Montaner and chair of the upcoming AIDS2010 conference said in a joint conference press release (.pdf) by the IAS, British Columbia Centre for Excellence In HIV/AIDS and the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy. "These policies fuel the AIDS epidemic and result in violence, increased crime rates and destabilisation of entire states - yet there is no evidence they have reduced rates of drug use or drug supply. As scientists, we are committed to raising our collective voice to promote evidence-based approaches to illicit drug policy that start by recognising that addiction is a medical condition, not a crime," added Montaner, who directs the British Columbia Centre for Excellence In HIV/AIDS (6/28).

Montaner and other HIV/AIDS experts "published Monday a Vienna Declaration (.pdf) calling for an end to ineffective and costly drug policies and for more emphasis on strategies that have been scientifically proven to work," Agence France-Presse reports (6/27).

"Outside of sub-Saharan Africa, injection drug use accounts for approximately one in three new cases of HIV. In some areas where HIV is spreading most rapidly, such as Eastern Europe and Central Asia, HIV prevalence can be as high as 70% among people who inject drugs, and in some areas more than 80% of all HIV cases are among this group," the Vienna Declaration states. "Governments and international organisations have ethical and legal obligations to respond to this crisis and must seek to enact alternative evidence-based strategies that can effectively reduce the harms of drugs without creating harms of their own," according to the declaration (6/28).

Current policy is ineffective

"The current approach to drug policy is ineffective because it neglects proven and evidence-based interventions, while pouring a massive amount of public funds and human resources into expensive and futile enforcement measures," said Evan Wood, founder of the International Centre for Science in Drug Policy, who was involved in the drafting of the declaration, AFP continues. "It's time to accept the war on drugs has failed and create drug policies that can meaningfully protect community health and safety using evidence, not ideology," Wood added (6/27).

The declaration also outlines several steps that international governments and organisations could take to improve drug

policies before calling on UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon "to urgently implement measures to ensure that the United Nations system - including the International Narcotics Control Board - speaks with one voice to support the decriminalisation of drug users and the implementation of evidence-based approaches to drug control" (6/28).

"Wood and his colleagues plan to track what influence the declaration has on world drug policy in preparation for [the 2012] AIDS conference in the United States," according to the Vancouver Sun (Coyne, 6/28).

The Kaiser Family Foundation will provide webcasts of select session from AIDS2010.

Achieving MDGs, global fight against drugs 'must go hand-in-hand,' UN Secretary-General Says

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon on Saturday spoke out about the effects drug abuse and illicit drug trafficking are having on the ability of countries to reach the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), Indo-Asian News Service reports (6/27).

"Our work to achieve the MDGs and fight drugs must go hand-in-hand. In seeking to eradicate illicit crops, we must also work to wipe out poverty," Ban said, marking the International Day against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking, observed annually 26 June, according to UN News Centre.

"Under this year's theme of 'Think Health, Not Drugs,' Ban noted that significant health challenges stem from drug abuse - including the spread of HIV through injecting drugs. One of the eight MDGs includes reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS," the news service adds (6/26).

Also during his address, Ban appealed for member states "to become parties to the UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime, which adopted in 2000, includes three protocols against human trafficking and illicit manufacturing and trafficking of firearms," Xinhua/People's Daily Online reports.

"The convention and protocols fall under the jurisdiction of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which announced in its new World Drug Report 2010 that amphetamine-type stimulants and prescription medications are increasingly becoming the drugs of choice globally," according to the news service (6/27).

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