

Seminar on Harm Reduction in Thailand

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Excellency Deputy Minister of Public Health Mr Manit Nopamornbodee
Distinguished guest and participants,

It is an honor to join you for the opening of this critical seminar on harm reduction and to acknowledge the recent progress in implementing harm reduction strategies in Thailand. The inclusion of long term methadone maintenance treatment, as part of a comprehensive harm reduction strategy, into the health benefit package of the National Health Security Program and its service delivery by participating hospitals is indeed a significant milestone in Thailand.

Although prevention of drug use is always the preferred option, it is also important in every country to face and address the medical, public health and societal needs arising from drug use to maximally reduce the harm it causes to the individual drug user, his/her family and society as a whole.

WHO recommends a set of evidence-based interventions to be included in a comprehensive harm reduction programme. One such intervention is the provision of methadone or other appropriate oral substitution therapy. Such treatment will greatly help drug users to cease the use of heroin and other opiates long enough to get some structure and stability back into their lives thus allowing them an opportunity to become functioning member of society once again.

Many drug users, particularly those who inject drugs, are also in need of preventive health services, particularly to prevent HIV and other blood-borne infections. The prevalence of HIV among drug injectors in Thailand has remained very high for many years. A primary reason for this has been the widespread sharing of contaminated needles and syringes. Therefore to address the ongoing HIV epidemic among drug injectors, needle and syringe exchange programmes (NESPs) must be effectively implemented. There is irrefutable evidence that the use of sterile injection equipment will help break the chain of HIV transmission among people who inject drugs and lower the rate of new HIV infections. Based on compelling evidence from numerous studies, places and programmes, NESPs are now recognized internationally as a key component of any comprehensive HIV prevention strategy. Drug injectors who are free of HIV have fewer health issues to manage when they engage in a drug treatment program.

Research has found that drug users are more likely to engage in high risk sexual behavior, therefore, information, education and communication programs to address these risk behaviours are also of critical importance for drug users and their sexual partners to lower the risk of contracting HIV and other STIs. This should include the promotion of condom use and easy availability of condoms among drug users.

Drug users who are already HIV infected will most likely develop a series of health problems over time. There is therefore a need for early diagnosis, treatment and care of those infected with HIV to protect the individual drug user and society. Counseling services are also a critical component of health services over the long-term care for HIV infected drug users. Closely linked is the essential anti-retroviral treatment and related services that must be provided for this client group. In

summary, it is this set of comprehensive services for drug users that should be provided as a basic human right without stigma or discrimination in order to minimize the harm from drug use.

In the past few years, WHO and other partners including key UN partners here today have worked constructively and collaboratively with the Ministry of Public Health to support MOPH colleagues in the development and implementation of an effective harm reduction program in Thailand. There are several collaborative activities in which WHO has taken part. For example, clinicians working in drug treatment clinics have been trained on anti-retroviral treatment for HIV-infected drug users. Comprehensive guidelines for health care workers on the implementation of harm reduction interventions have been developed. A group of professionals from various backgrounds including doctors, narcotic control officers, police, attorney of law, and others, together with staff from civil society organizations participated in a study visit to Malaysia to exchange knowledge and experience and also observe how harm reduction policies have been developed and implemented successfully in Malaysia, producing tangible results. The outcomes in Malaysia and other countries which have successfully implemented comprehensive harm reduction strategies are not only in the reduction of new HIV infections and harm among drug users, but also in the restored life, happiness, hope and security for the drug user and his/her family, as well as the community.

I would like to acknowledge the leadership, commitment, and hard work of the Ministry of Public Health in scaling up the methadone maintenance services and other comprehensive interventions as part of Thailand's harm reduction program. I wish you all every success in your efforts to roll out a comprehensive harm reduction programme in Thailand.