

War on Drugs

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By Olena Dub

Although the World Health Organization (WHO) has decided to include methadone to the "Essential Drug List", the Cabinet of Ministers is planning to ban any use of methadone. Methadone is one of the most effective and widely used drugs for substitution therapy in substance abuse.

Outraged by the Cabinet's intentions, NGOs working in area of harm-reduction and HIV prevention will demand that the government and Verkhovna Rada remove this issue from the list of topics to be discussed as contradicting WHO's decisions and the National Program on HIV/AIDS Prevention.

Who is interfering with implementation of the methadone program in Ukraine and why – this is the subject of the interview with Halyna Kaminska, technical advisor at the International Institute of Harm Reduction and director of Lviv's charitable foundation "Usi Razom" (All Together).

Please explain to our readers what is methadone and substitution therapy?

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Ukraine has set new challenges before society. One of them is changing the attitude toward drug users living with HIV/AIDS. In Ukraine, 70% of HIV-positive people are active users of injection drugs. How can society help these people? It is obvious that it would be unethical, and from a medical point of view, ineffective to set a goal of simply forcing them to stop using drugs. It is completely unrealistic; this is demagoguery and a vain hope.

What medicine can do for its citizens is use an approach that is working all over the world for many years. This approach is substitution supportive therapy that helps people stop using illegal "impure" drugs. This can be done by providing substitution drugs in medical institutions. In the world, 70% of the time they use methadone and in 30% - buprenorphin. All countries of the European Union use methadone as the medicine for supportive substitution therapy. This drug is preferred because it costs three times less than other drugs and because it can be used in the form of syrup. Buprenorphin comes either in tablets or injections.

So why can't we implement substitution supportive programs to lower the rate at which HIV infection is spreading in our country?

Society has found an "enemy" – injecting drug users. They get blamed for everything: the crime rate, epidemics, etc. On the other hand, we should think about why there is so much resistance to substitution therapy, why somebody even tries to falsify scientific findings, and why the government doesn't use the experience gained by Europe, the U.S. and even Asia?

Medicine that would cure drug addiction once and for all simply does not exist. It's a chronic disease. Society's mission is to reduce harm, help people break free of the trafficking of illegal drugs. Since in our country this approach is interfered with, we can only come to one conclusion: someone doesn't want drug users to move from the category of criminals to the category of patients being treated officially. Someone wants to control the illicit drugs market.

Today buprenorphin is used in Ukraine and this also raises concerns: it's distributed in tablets, which makes it easier to sell the drug on the "black market". On the other hand, try selling syrup, especially one that has a strong distinct scent (that's how methadone is used).

What does the Ministry of Health has to say about this situation?

The position of the Ministry of Health is very ambivalent. On the one hand they support all sorts of initiatives, but when it comes to making a political decision – they keep quiet. Really, someone has to take responsibility for the situation and approach toward helping drug users, especially those who are HIV-positive.

Not so long ago HIV-servicing organizations of Ukraine turned to Vice Premier Mykola Tomenko with an open letter. What do they say in the appeal?

We are extremely worried by information that procedural agreements have taken place between state authorities and that the resolution "About the approval of the list of narcotic, psychotropic substances and precursors" is being prepared to be signed by the Cabinet of Ministers.

Especially surprising is the fact that this project was not discussed at a session of the National Coordination Committee on HIV/AIDS that was created not so long ago. The Committee (in accordance with the Cabinet of Ministers' resolution) is the organ that must work out the policy on fighting the growing HIV/AIDS epidemic and substance abuse. And it is absolutely unacceptable to ignore the expertise of NGOs that for years have been working in the area of HIV/AIDS prevention, especially with the more vulnerable groups (injecting drugs users).

The proposition to include methadone in the list of illicit drugs prohibited from use in medicinal practice, which is included in the project of this resolution, contradicts global experience, international documents and the position of all international organizations. This would mean taking a backward step in fighting HIV/AIDS and drug abuse.

In our open letter we asked Mykola Tomenko, the vice-premier of humanitarian affairs, to immediately look into this situation, so as not to allow this faulty decision to be approved. We also demand that this issue and the essence of this project be discussed at an emergency session of the National Coordination Committee.

And if the government does not respond to theses demands, what will be the reaction of NGOs?

Indeed, we very much hope that common sense and the experience of the international community will overcome prejudice, populism and dilettantism. Since not so long ago methadone gained an "essential drug" status. To argue about this medicine now is to admit to being uncivilized, to say the least.