

Harm reduction: milestones, dilemmas, prospects, challenges

As the curtain closes on the first quarter-century of knowledge (and lack thereof) on HIV infection and the respective clinical syndrome (AIDS) we hereby provide an audience of professionals, activists, and communities with a papers on HIV/AIDS among injecting drug users in Brazil, within the perspective of a worldwide public health problem.

The challenge raised by injecting drug use and the spread of HIV and other blood-borne and sexually transmitted pathogens among users has spawned proposals ranging from cracking down on drug traffic and/or use to a plurality of actions aimed at reducing the harm resulting from such consumption, focusing on education and public health. The current special issue, far from providing definitive answers, seeks to stimulate reflection on what has been done to formulate new questions. The special issue discusses themes related to the evolution of knowledge on HIV/AIDS in a comprehensive approach to the IDU patient living with HIV/AIDS, who faces various clinical conditions as well as family and social problems.

In an especially dynamic epidemiological profile, we now observe a (re)concentration of the epidemic in particularly vulnerable population groups (marginalized from others social segments with greater capacity for mobilization and lobbying) towards social strata that are sizeable yet with limited visibility. Among such population groups, injecting drug users are paradigmatic to the extent that they suffer the consequences not only of discrimination and stigma, but also of repression by the law enforcement and courts system.

Brazil has provided lessons to the world on how to combine public policies with respect for the autonomy of social movements and human rights in dealing with the threat posed by HIV/AIDS. Of course the most visible side of the Brazilian Program is the distribution of antiretroviral drugs through public health services nationwide. The program would be neither feasible nor ethical if it excluded any segment of the population, which is the opening theme to this supplement. Any policy would be iniquitous if the effort and expense of providing free treatment to individuals already infected were not combined with initiatives for prevention, psychosocial support, evaluation, and research. Brazil can also teach what it has learned in this area through the implementation of a series of prevention initiatives with strong support from the Federal government in financing, technical training, and supervision, yet without relegating any population groups or segments to a subordinate position. On the contrary, despite discordant opinions, drug users comprise a strategic group for prevention and support initiatives, given their central place in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, in addition to a combination of harms and risks that affect their partners and peers, including structural violence and family and social alienation, in addition to the negative consequences of drug use itself, such as addiction and overdose.

As stated by Walter Benjamin, beyond the story of the winners, it is necessary to gather the remains of the losses and defeats, since only thus can the angel of history breathe a fresh wind other than omission. We hope and believe that the various authors in this supplement will contribute with their scientific expertise and commitment to further strides towards a kind of public health worthy of the name, in dialogue between research, health policy, and respect for fellow humans, beyond the statistics on morbidity and mortality.

Much remains to be done, but nothing can be built without systematic and critical reflection on what has been achieved so far. May the readers partake of this effort!

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