

Legalizing the production of opium for medical use is neither viable or necessary

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Proposals to legalise the production of opium in Afghanistan for medical use are unworkable and unnecessary, says the Minister of State for Africa, Asia, and the United Nations in an editorial in this week's BMJ.

Writing in response to an article* in the BMJ that called for legal cultivation of poppies to combat the shortage of opiate medicines, Mark Malloch-Brown argues that a sustainable solution to the problem of illegal opium production requires attractive, economically viable legal livelihoods, security and good governance in Afghanistan, as well as a determined effort to reduce demand around the world.

Around 90% of the world's opium comes from Afghanistan, most of it intended for the illegal market. Opium offers farmers a quick turnover and high returns, but production continues to drive instability and insurgency.

The Afghanistan government lacks the resources, institutional capacity, and control mechanisms to ensure that opium grown would be purchased legally, he says. In addition, those cultivating opium for legal medical usage would be in direct competition with illegal traffickers, which in turn could drive up the price of opium and encourage increased cultivation.

He suggests that the demand for legal opium is better met by established sources of production from countries like Turkey and Australia, where there are fewer problems with security and stability and where

production costs are up to six times cheaper.

He also points out that a greater supply of medical opiates is not needed because the global demand for medical and scientific purposes is already fully met.

According to Malloch-Brown, the essential challenge is to create development initiatives and economic incentives that provide attractive legal alternatives for farmers. This can be done by improving the infrastructure and local government capacity, giving farmers improved access to markets, land, water, credit, food security, and employment, he argues.

The question of demand is the key, he says. The arguments regarding opium production are global and cannot be controlled with local strategies.

“Only by reducing demand [for heroin] on the streets everywhere will the producers and traffickers on the streets of Afghanistan be given the best reason to follow their alternative livelihoods”, he concludes.

Source: British Medical Journal

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