

Experts urge reform of global drug policy

June 28 2010, By VERONIKA OLEKSYN , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Policies that criminalize drug users fuel the spread of AIDS and should be reformed, experts preparing for an international conference said Monday.

Instead, governments, international organizations and the U.N. should promote policies that include opiate substitution therapy and needle and syringe programs that have been shown to reduce HIV rates without increasing rates of drug use, said the experts from organizations such as the International AIDS Society, the International Center for Science in Drug Policy and the British Columbia Center for Excellence in HIV/AIDS. They also want compulsory drug treatment centers to be scrapped, saying they are ineffective and violate human rights.

"The criminalization of illicit drug users is fueling the HIV epidemic and has resulted in overwhelmingly negative health and social consequences. A full policy reorientation is needed," the experts said in a declaration issued ahead of an AIDS conference that gets under way in the Austrian capital on July 18.

Among other things, the declaration says there is no evidence that increasing the "ferocity" of law enforcement reduces the prevalence of drug use and claims that the number of countries in which people inject [illegal drugs](#) is growing.

"Many of us in AIDS research and care confront the devastating impacts of misguided drug policies every day," Julio Montaner, president of the International AIDS Society and director of the BC Center for Excellence

in HIV/AIDS, said in a statement.

"As scientists, we are committed to raising our collective voice to promote evidence-based approaches to illicit drug policy that start by recognizing that addiction is a medical condition, not a crime," added Montaner, who will serve as chairman of the Vienna conference.

The declaration urges governments, international organizations and the United Nations to carry out a transparent review of the effectiveness of current drug policies and to implement a science-based public health approach.

While legal barriers to needle programs and opiate substitution therapy mean hundreds of thousands of people become infected with HIV and hepatitis C every year, the criminalization of drug users has resulted in record incarceration rates, the experts said in joint statement.

"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 Center for Science in Drug Policy.

"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 appeared to be echoing a comment made by U.S. drug czar Gil Kerlikowske last month. In an interview with The Associated Press, he said that after 40 years the United States' \$1 trillion war on drugs has not been successful.

More information: The Vienna Declaration:

<http://www.viennadeclaration.com>

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