

Tangiers pioneer clinic fights drug addiction, stigma

October 29 2013, by Omar Brouksy

In Morocco's drug capital Tangiers, a pioneering clinic is trying to help addicts fight a rising habit in a conservative Muslim state where many would prefer the problem stay underground.

"I don't want to steal from people to get my fix," Mohammed tells a group of around 30 hard drug users who have come to the Hasnouna clinic seeking support.

Once famed as a haven for fugitives, spies and junkies, the port city of Tangiers sits at the crossroads between Europe and Africa, the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, making it a prime drug trafficking destination.

But while it has benefited from targeted development programmes, notably the construction of a giant cargo port nearby, its seedier side is never far away, and [heroin](#) use has been rising over the past five years.

The clinic, which opened in 2006 in the heart of Tangiers, claims to be the first in Morocco to help addicts by working with them to come clean, in a traditional, religious society where they are normally just ignored.

"For me the hardest thing is the look I get from people, the sense of exclusion we are subjected to," says one user, asking not to be identified.

"In Tangiers, everyone knows everyone, and they are suspicious of us. Sometimes the taxi drivers don't stop when they recognise us," he adds.

Some of those attending a meeting at the clinic described living normal lives in Morocco's northernmost city before turning to drugs, while others said they came to Tangiers after growing hooked elsewhere.

"When I left school at 17, I did all sorts of jobs, working as a car park attendant, a porter at the port, as a waiter in a cafe," says Mohammed, adding that the methadone substitute he now receives makes giving up heroin easier.

Explaining their methods, staff say a priority is to "accompany" the patients by building a dialogue based on mutual trust, before helping them "get out" of their drug-taking routine.

"This strategy of being close to them involves helping the addicts to understand their illness, to be aware of the problem of addiction," Faouzia Bouzitoune tells AFP.

The clinic is authorised to supply addicts with methadone, but as Mohammed Essalhi, the doctor who signs off on all such decisions, explains, they first have to prove that they really want to stop.

"Methadone is not an end in itself. Some people come here simply because they don't have the money to buy heroin."

One addict at the clinic said he's been attending the meetings for months and was still waiting for a methadone prescription.

Deal with stigma and prejudices

There are no official figures on heroin consumption in Morocco, either locally or nationwide, given the strong social taboo that surrounds the issue.

But due to its location, Tangiers is more exposed than other cities to the drug, which mainly comes from Europe via Ceuta, the Spanish territory around 80 kilometres (50 miles) to the east, where a shot costs between three and five euros (\$4 and \$6.5), clinic staff say.

"The minimum is three fixes a day, but most need between five and seven, sometimes 10," according to an addict at the centre trying to quit.

Fatima, 45, admits being one of those who turned to crime to fund her habit, also working as a prostitute, before finally coming clean "thanks to the association", after 20 years of drug abuse.

Originally from a middle-class family in Rabat, she says she fell in with a group of diplomats in the capital and began taking cocaine, before switching to heroine.

"I was outside of society. In a country like ours, women drug addicts suffer much more," she told AFP.

The staff of the Hasnouna clinic say they also have to deal with the prejudices of Moroccan society, and the stigma associated with drug addiction.

"We know all about that," says Bouzitoune.

"While we work essentially with the users, indirectly we are also trying to change the way of thinking a little bit. We have to convince people that [drug](#) addiction is an illness," she adds.

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