

Denmark opens more 'drug rooms' after successful trial

April 10 2014, by Sören Billing

The gangly, 46-year-old father of three speaks five languages and talks effortlessly about international politics. What he can't do, for the moment at least, is kick his cocaine and heroin habit.

But when he shoots up, Kais Neni now goes to a supervised, state-funded [drug consumption](#) room—Denmark's 18-month-old approach to a problem with no easy solution.

"It's better than being in the streets," said Neni, before getting his fix in the space where a medical professional remains on hand to help drug users if they overdose.

After kicking his 15-year habit three years ago, Neni relapsed and headed back to the streets of Vesterbro, a seedy but gentrifying neighbourhood behind Copenhagen's main train station.

The area is home to Scandinavia's largest and most open drug scene, where for years residents and tourists have grown used to seeing addicts shoot up in phone booths, stairwells or simply on the pavements.

"Having a drug consumption room is accepting something that is already happening," said Rasmus Koberg Christiansen, the manager of two of the three state-funded drug consumption rooms in Copenhagen.

The first one opened in the capital in October 2012 and there are now rooms in every one of Denmark's main cities.

"No country has solved the drug problem. There are countries that hand down death sentences for taking drugs but they still have problems," he said.

"It's an acknowledgement of the fact that there really are some people whom we can't reach with rehab—right now. And what do we do with those people?" he added.

The approach contrasts markedly with Scandinavian neighbour Sweden's strict "zero tolerance" policy, which is credited with giving Sweden one of Europe's lowest illicit drug consumption rates—but is also blamed for a rising number of drug-related deaths as addicts fear seeking help for an overdose.

Little opposition

Proponents of drug consumption rooms say they reduce the drug paraphernalia on the streets—children in the area have been caught playing with needles—and help prevent the spread of disease among addicts. They also restore some dignity to a highly vulnerable group by allowing them to take their drugs in a safe, hygienic environment.

More importantly, advocates believe it prevents deadly overdoses. In 2011, Denmark recorded 285 [drug overdose deaths](#), an all-time high. In 2012, it was down to 210, the lowest number in 19 years and believed in part thanks to the drug rooms.

Safe rooms where addicts can take drugs without fear of prosecution first appeared in Switzerland in the 1980s.

Supervised injection sites in Germany, Spain and the Netherlands followed, but Denmark has drawn attention abroad because it's the first country in more than a decade to have introduced them.

Police do not go inside the safe rooms. While they do not tolerate the sale of drugs and can still arrest someone for illicit drug possession in Vesterbro, they usually won't confiscate the drugs of a user headed to a safe room.

Unlike certain other countries, Denmark has had little opposition to opening drug rooms, either in major cities or smaller towns.

Danish policy makers have tried to make the centres more accessible than in other European countries, notably by limiting bureaucracy.

Users simply have to register an alias, their hometown and what drugs they use before they can enter the facility. Addicts are never banned from the premises even if they turn violent or threaten staff.

The users have to bring their own drugs but the centre provides clean needles, special exhaust fans for smokers, and even a machine to help addicts find veins that haven't collapsed.

Since Denmark opened its first drug consumption rooms a year and a half ago, there have been 150 overdoses, none of which were fatal, official figures show.

'In no way fancy'

Last August, the government decided to provide national funding for drug taking rooms after the ones financed by the city of Copenhagen were deemed a success.

Official figures show that one of the capital's rooms recorded 2,400 unique users and 500 to 800 instances of drug consumption— by injection or smoking —a day.

Not all agree with the initiative, however.

"Drug consumption rooms are the same as giving up on people instead of working to give them a second chance in life," conservative lawmaker Tom Behnke wrote before the first room opened.

Others fear the rooms will create more addicts by making life for [drug users](#) "too easy".

But Koberg Christiansen disagrees. "A drug consumption room is in no way fancy," he said. "This is a very, very tough environment. It's hardcore, and there's nobody who's getting an easier life."

Typical is the safe room addict Neni uses, inside a homeless shelter. Though spotless, the air had a funky smell and blood splattered on the floor as a man next to Neni tried to inject himself.

"There aren't any young people who come here just because they think it's fun," said Koberg Christiansen.

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