

Media Release

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Russian Government's Profound Denial of the Evidence on Harm Reduction Fuelling HIV Epidemic in Russia

Bangkok, Thursday April 23, 2009--The Russian Government's refusal to legalise methadone and introduce needle exchange programmes, and its continued and blatant misrepresentation of proven research on harm reduction is allowing an HIV epidemic in the country to go unchecked, Craig McClure, Executive Director of the International AIDS Society told the International Harm Reduction Association annual conference today. McClure's remarks were made as part of his closing keynote address at the conference entitled "Reflections on the Politics of Harm Reduction and the Global Response to HIV."

"In Russia methadone remains illegal, and the Russian government maintains that there is no evidence that it works to prevent HIV infection or reduce the harms associated with injecting opioids," said McClure. "This denial of evidence is so profound that the government even dares to blatantly distort the facts at international meetings, such as at the high level meeting of the Commission on Narcotic Drugs in Vienna last month."

Across the Eastern European and Central Asia region, some 1.5 million people are living with HIV of whom 940,000 are in Russia. The region is home to the world's most rapidly expanding HIV/AIDS epidemic. Over 3.7 million people inject drugs, with over two million people injecting in Russia alone, the highest per capita in the world, with four times the overall global prevalence of injecting drug use. Close to 70 per cent of all HIV infections in Russia are due to injecting drug use, versus 30 per cent globally outside of sub-Saharan Africa. (1)

The International AIDS Society has made the issue of access to methadone in Russia and throughout Eastern Europe and Central Asia a policy priority. (2)

Decades of research show that opioid substitution therapy is the most effective intervention to reduce injecting and prevent HIV infection among people dependent on opioids, particularly if delivered as part of a comprehensive package of harm reduction interventions including education and counselling, needle and syringe exchange programmes, provision of condoms, HIV diagnosis and treatment and TB and STI diagnosis and treatment.

“Blatant and wilful denial of the evidence can only be based on deep-seated fear. Fear drives the global war on drugs. Fear drives abuse by doctors and others in the medical system of people who use drugs and the continuing use of so-called “treatments”, that might more accurately be called “torture”, that are a deliberate denial not just of the evidence and of human rights but of the Hippocratic Oath.”

McClure ended his keynote address by saying that it was crucial to bridge the gap between the harm reduction and anti-drugs movements.

“We are not “pro-drug”, we are not “encouraging drug use” and we must reach out consistently and with compassion to the anti-drug movement for common ground and dialogue,” concluded McClure.

The International AIDS Society (IAS) is the world’s leading independent association of HIV professionals, with over 13,000 members in 188 countries working at all levels of the global response to HIV/AIDS. IAS members represent scientists, clinicians, public health and community practitioners on the frontlines of the epidemic. The IAS is the custodian of the biennial International AIDS Conference and the host of the IAS Conference on HIV Pathogenesis, Treatment and Prevention.

Notes to editors:

(1) UNAIDS (2008), *‘2008 Report on the global AIDS epidemic’*

(2) Next year, in July 2010, the International AIDS Conference will be held in Vienna, Austria. The conference will have a major focus on injecting drug use, human rights and HIV. There will be a special sub-focus on Eastern Europe and Central Asia, using Vienna in its historical role as bridge between East and West.

About the International Harm Reduction Association:

The International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA) is the leading organisation promoting a **harm reduction approach** to all psychoactive substances on a global basis. IHRA exists to prevent the negative social, health, economic and criminal impacts of illicit drugs, alcohol and tobacco for individuals, communities and society.

About the conference:

Harm Reduction 2009 www.ihra.net/Thailand/MediaCentre is expected to attract some 1000 delegates from around 80 countries. The event has become the focal point for knowledge sharing, networking and promoting evidence-based best practice in the field of harm reduction. The delegates include front line workers, researchers, policy makers, politicians, people from international organisations, people who use drugs and people working in criminal justice. These events have helped to put harm reduction on the map and to coordinate advances, innovations, evidence and advocacy in this field for the last two decades.

Where: Imperial Queen's Park Hotel, 199 Sukhumvit Soi 22, Bangkok 10110, Thailand

When: Monday April 20 - Thursday April 23, 2009

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