

## Book reviews

### **Drug policy, HIV and hepatitis C in the frame of human rights**

#### **Australasian Society for HIV Medicine Inc., HIV and Hepatitis C: Policy, Discrimination, Legal and Ethical Issues**

Australasian Society for HIV Medicine Inc., Darlinghurst, 2005.

#### **War on Drugs, HIV/AIDS and Human Rights**

K. Malinowska-Sempruch, S. Galagher (Eds.), International Debate Education Association, New York.

The recent book, edited by Malinowska-Sempruch and Galagher, and the ‘little book’ edited by the Australasian Society for HIV Medicine Inc. address relevant questions related to drug policy and its interface with policies aiming to curb the spread of HIV and Hepatitis C (HCV).

*War on Drugs* presents the perspectives of those who support drug enforcement and those who advocate for the reform of drug laws and harm reduction. *HIV and Hepatitis C: Policy Discrimination, Legal and Ethical Issues* explores the fates of the two major infectious diseases affecting injection drug users: HIV/AIDS and HCV. The latter, which is in pocket format (135 pages) and edited by the Australasian Society, tries to address the contrasting responses to the challenges posed by HIV/AIDS and HCV in Australia and worldwide. Despite the attempts to keep a balance between two major public health problems, most chapters highlight the history, policy and legislation on HIV/AIDS (six of the nine chapters address themes related to HIV/AIDS, one chapter focuses on HCV and three chapters discuss both).

While in the Western world the HIV/AIDS epidemic has been highly visible, mobilising activists, the media, and people affected by the virus, HCV has remained largely the concern of public health officials and of a relatively small number of people living with symptomatic HCV. Many people, especially those in developing countries, harbour asymptomatic HCV infection but are unaware of their sero-status. Those progressing to fibrosis/steatosis or liver cirrhosis and liver cancer often receive their diagnosis without ever being aware of having HCV.

It is argued that HCV has not benefited from the coalition of efforts and interests that gave impetus to the brave ‘fight’ against HIV/AIDS in the Western world.

This is put down to the often protracted and asymptomatic course of HCV infection and its concentration among marginalised (and often criminalised) injection drug users. However, while the fight against HIV/AIDS is visible in affluent societies, such as Australia, due to concerted action by gay activists, liberal politicians, concerned health professionals and the media, in other societies such initiatives are absent. This is due to a mixture of denial, prejudice, lack of a democratic media, of political will, of funds and of qualified personnel.

The examination of contemporary public health crises within the framework of Human Rights constitutes an unfinished task and a permanent challenge for most societies. These debates are as essential and topical nowadays as they were two decades ago, to challenge failed policies and hypocritical governments. The book edited by Malinowska-Sempruch and Galagher documents the perspective of critics of the current “War on Drugs” paradigm, such as Alex Wodak, a leading proponent for the reform of current drug policy and the timely prevention of HIV/AIDS among drug users. Other chapters are written by champions of drug policy reform such as Ethan Nadelmann. Scholars who have reframed the public health debate from the perspective of protection and promotion of human rights, such as Jonathan Mann, Larry Gostin and Sofia Gruskin, document the failure and contradictions of current drug policies in terms of their inefficiency and disrespect for basic human rights (for example, the right to education of young people who have violated these drug laws and have been incarcerated and/or are receiving treatment for substance use).

Faithful to the purpose of presenting contrasting points of view and fostering debate, the book also presents the views of Voth and Lewinsky, champions of drug-enforcement policies that discredit (from their perspective) “harm reduction” as a “new version of legalization policy” (p. 41, verbatim).

The chapter written by Jonathan Caulkins (“Law Enforcement’s Role in a Harm Reduction Regime”) opens a new path in the decade-long debate between those trying to bring a human rights/public health perspective into current drug policies and those attributing the failures of current policies to the less than optimal enactment of drug enforcement measures. The latter have called repeatedly for “more of the same”, for stricter enforcement of what they see as lenient policies and politicians. From my own perspective, Caulkins combines

very inspired insights with some confusing reasoning, for example when he states that “punitive approaches are more likely to pass the test of being harm reducing if one considers not only harms to drug offenders but also harms to society generally” (verbatim, p. 331). What I have seen in Brazil and other contexts is an escalation of violence fostered by punitive approaches. However, it is up to the reader to decide whether such insights actually represent a third path in the “dialogue of deaf people”.

Both books are interesting and useful, but the IDEA series book could be improved by more careful editing. It seems unacceptable to see the late Jonathan Mann described as an active François-Xavier Bagnould Professor (p. 111), especially considering his role as a champion of human rights and his tragic and untimely death. In the same vein, the text

should be carefully proof-read in order to eliminate the many typing errors.

In summary, both publications address key issues in the field of drug policy, public health and human rights protection. They will be helpful for both the specialist reader and the curious lay public, in examining the dilemmas posed by current drug policies and exploring the possibilities for alternative approaches.

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