

## Doctors criticise UN's approach to global drugs control

A high-level UN meeting on international drug policy came to a close last week with doctors lamenting the lack of progress on health issues. Ed Holt reports from Vienna.



Bloomberg via Getty Images

For more on the Vienna conference see <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/frontpage/2014/March/57th-cnd-session-ends-with-resolutions-that-signpost-way-forward-in-tackling-illicit-drugs.html?ref=fs1>

For more on International Doctors for Healthy Drug Policies see <http://www.idhdp.com/en/home/>

Growing numbers of doctors are calling for a health-based approach to be adopted as a cornerstone of global drugs policy as a high-level UN conference highlights what critics say are continued failings in international bodies' strategies for dealing with global drug problems.

The High-Level Review at the latest annual session of the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND)—the chief policy-making body for international drug control—in Vienna earlier this month assessed how the UN is meeting goals for dealing with the global drug problem ahead of a UN General Assembly Special Session on Drugs in 2016.

But a joint ministerial statement on that progress produced during the conference left civil society groups and doctors pushing for an overhaul of existing drugs policies bitterly disappointed. Failing to address issues such as the death penalty for drugs offences and with no inclusion of the term harm reduction—because it is unacceptable to countries like Russia which take a hard line approach to drugs—it did little but reaffirm past commitments.

Chris Ford, founder and clinical director of the non-governmental organisation International Doctors for Healthy Drug Policies (IDHDP), told *The Lancet*: "The statement was meant to be a new consensus [between UN member states] but sadly it was rubbish and showed that lots of work still needs to be done."

Civil society groups working with people who use drugs have for years argued that organisations like the CND and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) are clinging to a traditional punitive criminal approach to global drug problems that scientific evidence shows to have failed.

Ford says: "We know the global war on drugs has failed and this has had devastating consequences for individuals and communities around the world. Large amounts of money have been spent on criminalisation and repressive measures have failed to curtail supply or consumption."

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"But these have harmed people who use drugs, impeded progress on public health measures to reduce HIV and hepatitis C, limited opioid substitution therapy, and prevented other harm reduction measures being available to all who need them. Drug policy is being used by many countries to justify people's and governments' moralistic and prejudiced opinions."

The conference itself highlighted the fact that a number of individual member states think the same way and are breaking with standard UN policy on drugs. Some countries' delegates openly talked of the economic, human, and public health costs of what they see as a failed war on drugs.

The conference was also held against a backdrop of recently undertaken or planned fundamental reforms of individual states' drugs policies. In December last year, Uruguay became the first country in the world to legalise commercial sales of marijuana and regulate its production. Commercial sales of marijuana began in the US state of Colorado in January while sales of marijuana will begin in Washington state in June.

But the UN has slammed these reforms. Just days before the start

of the Vienna conference, UNODC executive director Yuri Fedotov said Uruguay's cannabis legalisation was "not a solution to dealing with world drug problems".

Uruguay has defended its actions as being in the interests of its population. Speaking to *The Lancet*, Diego Canepa, deputy secretary of the office of Uruguayan President Jose Mujica, said: "We believe that in terms of our health policies this is the best option for Uruguay. We think that prohibition is not the answer and overwhelming evidence has shown that it has been a mistake over the last 40 years."

Opinion among the medical community on legalisation of drugs is divided. But Sebastien Saville, executive director of IDHDP, told *The Lancet* during the CND conference, regardless of what individual doctors may think of that issue, what members of his organisation are agreed on is that global drug policy needs to be reformed with a health-based approach adopted at its heart.

The IDHDP, which is gaining new members every day and hopes to have 5000 by 2016, believes that a change in global drugs policy can be effected if enough medical professionals speak up. "Doctors and medical professionals are often well-respected and trusted in society and their opinions hold a certain degree of weight, both among people and policy makers", said Saville.

"If they, the people who deal with the effects of drug use at a practical, clinical level, speak out with a strong voice, it will be more difficult for drugs policy makers to not take notice of the evidence showing that a health-based approach to drugs problems is more effective than current drug policies."

Ed Holt