



NEWS RELEASE

Health-Based Regulation Must Replace Prohibition of Illegal Drugs

- New Vision Must Replace War on Drugs, Experts Say -

For Immediate Release

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VANCOUVER - Experts from around the world, including the Health Officers Council of BC, today agreed that the war on drugs is an abysmal failure and that in order to address the harmful health, social and public safety effects of illegal drugs, a health-based approach should replace criminalization.

Additionally, due to the negative health effects, and widespread use, of alcohol and tobacco, stricter regulation of these substances should also be adopted, said medical, academic and legal experts gathered for the two-day conference *Beyond Drug Prohibition: A Public Health Approach* sponsored by the non-profit Keeping the Door Open: Dialogues on Drug Use.

“The uses and misuses of tobacco, alcohol and other drugs in Canada result in harms that add up to billions of dollars every year,” said Dr. Perry Kendall, BC’s Provincial Health Officer. “As a society we are both inconsistent and frequently unsuccessful in our approaches to minimizing the harm from psychoactive substance use. This forum examines some alternatives to the status quo.”

Dr. Kendall was responding to a newly released discussion paper by the Health Officers Council of BC titled, *A Public Health Approach To Drug Control in Canada*, which recommends reform of federal and provincial laws and international agreements that deal with illegal drugs, development of pan-Canadian public health strategies to manage all psychoactive drugs, including alcohol and prescription drugs, and improved capabilities to monitor and provide information on the health and social effects of psychoactive drugs and drug control strategies.

“Today in Vancouver we have experts from four countries, including the United States, saying chronic dependence – whether it is to cigarettes, alcohol, heroin or cocaine – is a health issue that should not be dealt with in the criminal justice system,” said Gillian Maxwell, chair of Keeping the Door Open: Dialogues on Drug Use.

“Prohibition contributes directly to some of the negative social consequences of problematic substance use, including criminal activity, homelessness, and spreading diseases like HIV and hepatitis C,” she added.

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In Washington State, a coalition of professional and civic groups coordinated by Seattle's King County Bar Association has initiated a public dialogue examining drug prohibition and discussing the development of a workable alternative regulatory approach.

"Our bar association has published a series of reports in the last few years that have helped to spur sentencing reductions, increased treatment funding and shifts in police priorities in their area," said lawyer Roger Goodman, director of the King County Bar Association's Drug Policy Project, who addressed the conference.

"Our latest report exposes the failures of drug prohibition and calls for the state government to establish a commission of experts to recommend steps toward a regulatory approach for currently prohibited psychoactive drugs," Mr. Goodman added, noting his bar association's latest groundbreaking report lays out the parameters of a new legal framework for drug control as an alternative to prohibition.

Around the world, evidence is clear that trying to control drug use and trafficking through prohibition does not work, said conference keynote speaker Prof. Cindy Fazey of the University of Liverpool, U.K., who was the first Chief of Demand Reduction for the United Nations Drug Control Programme.

"There is a clear movement, especially in Europe, away from penal sanctions and even criminal ones to administrative or treatment options," said Prof. Fazey, a sociologist and criminologist who began research on drugs in 1966 and who has worked with governments around the world on drug policy.

"The international drug conventions do not determine the sanctions for any possession offence of illicit drugs. In some countries, you can grow a small amount of cannabis, buy up to 30 grams of cannabis, be in possession of any drugs for personal use, and get an administrative fine not a criminal record. You can also be prescribed heroin for free," she added.

Conference speakers include: Diane Tobin and Ron Morgan of the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU) offering perspectives from drug users; Stephen Easton, Senior Fellow, the Fraser Institute; Dr. Tim Stockwell, Centre for Addictions Research of BC; Dr. Ron Borland, a cancer prevention specialist from Australia; Steve Rolles of the U.K.-based Transform Drug Policy Foundation; retired provincial court judge JB Paradis; RCMP Chief Superintendent Bud Mercer; Donald MacPherson, Drug Policy Coordinator for the City of Vancouver; cannabis expert, lawyer Kirk Tousaw; Ethel Whitty, Director, The Carnegie Centre; and Rev. Dr. Steven Epperson of Vancouver's Unitarian Church speaking on 'The Misguided War and Our Search for Meaning'.

Keeping the Door Open: Dialogues on Drug Use is a coalition of individuals and organizations representing a diverse range of stakeholder groups, institutional and community-based service providers, health authorities, research centres, charitable foundations, public policy makers, drug consumers, consumer advocates, government and business officials.