

Heroin-assisted therapy in Switzerland ¹

In the early 1990s it was observed that the existing therapeutic options were not meeting the needs of some severely dependent individuals. These are addicts who, in spite of receiving various therapies, repeatedly relapse into dependence. They suffer from health and social problems and are exposed to a high risk of infection with HIV or hepatitis and of over-dosage. Their frequent criminal activity to finance their drug habit places a burden on society. It was against this background that in 1992 the Federal Government approved a research programme designed to investigate whether heroin-assisted therapy could provide the treatment needed by this specific category of drug addicts.

The objectives of heroin-assisted therapy are:

- lasting participation in therapy;
- social integration, improvement of the individual's physical and mental well-being;
- reduction of the risk of infection with HIV or hepatitis, and the risk of these diseases spreading;
- creating a basis for the long-term abstinence from opiates.

The three-year research programme showed that this therapy improved participants' physical and mental well-being and their social integration. At the same time there was a massive reduction in drug-related crime.

The results of this work were acclaimed at home and abroad, although there was also severe criticism of Switzerland for having taken such an unconventional approach to therapy. Doubt was also cast on the scientific integrity of research findings.

Heroin-assisted treatment was given a legal basis in October 1998 and is now part of the accepted range of therapeutic options. At the end of 1999 there were 16 treatment centres using this approach in Switzerland, offering a total of 1.065 places. This is available only to severely dependent drug users with serious social and health problems.

¹ Out of:

Swiss Federal Office of Public Health (BAG) (ed.): Swiss Drug Policy, Berne September 2000, p. 17