



Avoid stigmatising language for people who use drugs, global commission urges

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London

People who use drugs are unfairly stigmatised by being described in derogatory terms by some clinicians, politicians, and the media, a global report has said.¹

Terms such as “junkie,” “addict,” and “drug/substance abuser” should be avoided, said the Global Commission on Drug Policy—a body made up of political leaders, cultural figures, and personalities from the business sector, including Kofi Annan, former secretary general of the United Nations, and Richard Branson, founder of the Virgin Group.

In a report published on 9 January the commission said that it wanted to tackle worldwide problems in drug perception. “Prejudices and fears surrounding drugs are expressed in stigmatising language, stigmatisation leads to social discrimination and repressive laws, and prohibition validates fears and prejudices,” it said, listing specific terms that should or should not be used.

The authors urged leaders to provide reliable and consistent information and to review the evidence for more effective policies. And the public should keep governments, parliaments, the police and judiciary, the media, and healthcare and social professionals accountable, they added.

The report recommended that clinicians and healthcare professionals should be vocal in promoting evidence based prevention, treatment, and harm reduction services and should tackle perception based stigmas in healthcare settings.

It said, “Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers who are in contact with people who use drugs have a major role to play in changing the perceptions on drugs. They are often the first point of contact with people who use drugs, and can be influential in feeding evidence back to the public.

“As they are in a position of trust, they must play an important advocacy role in improving the provision of services for people with problematic drug use. In particular, experienced healthcare professionals must be vocal in defending the usefulness of treatments that have proven effective—by speaking up in support of opioid substitution treatment, for example, which is still stigmatised by large portions of society.”

The report was launched at an event held in London and presented by members of the Global Commission on Drug Policy including Helen Clark, former prime minister of New Zealand and administrator of the UN Development Programme; Nick Clegg, former UK deputy prime minister; and Ruth Dreifuss, former president of Switzerland and the commission chair.

Clegg said, “Current drug policies are all too often based on perceptions and passionate beliefs, not facts. Any drug use carries risks, but only a small number of people who use drugs go on to face addiction or dependency. Those who do develop problems need our help, not the threat of criminal punishment.”

Michel Kazatchkine, professor of medicine and former executive director of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, said, “Addiction remains extremely stigmatised in healthcare settings. Language matters. Research has shown that even trained mental health practitioners treat differently cases where patients are referred to as ‘substance abusers’ than those alluded to as ‘people with a substance use problem.’”

1 Global Commission on Drug Policy. The world drug perception problem—countering prejudices about people who use drugs: 2017 report. Jan 2018. www.globalcommissionondrugs.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/GCDP-Report-2017_Perceptions-ENGLISH.pdf.

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