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‘Addict’. ‘Junkie’ jargon. Who cares?

Extreme social stigma holds back drug recovery

The junk of society - dangerous, unpredictable and, crucially, only having themselves to blame is how society thinks of drug users and former users. The extreme stigma attached to drug addiction represents a massive obstacle to rehabilitation and recovery; hindering access to treatment, securing work and housing and rejoining society, and lasting for very long periods of time - a new evidence review published today by the UK Drug Policy Commission reveals

‘Sinning & Sinned Against: The Stigmatisation of Problem Drug Users’ by Charlie Lloyd is the first instalment of a four part research study, supported by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation with additional funding from the Scottish Drug Recovery Consortium, and led by Professor Colin Blakemore (Professor of Neuroscience, Oxford University and UKDPC Commissioner), that asks why so much stigma is attached to drug addiction, how it may prevent social reintegration and whether society is ready for a shift towards a more compassionate approach, geared more towards care than punishment?

The stigma project follows an earlier UKDPC study *‘Working towards recovery’*

(http://www.ukdpc.org.uk/publications.shtml#Employment_report) that found that **two thirds of employers said they would refuse to employ a former heroin or crack user, even if they were otherwise suitable for the job.**

When the coalition government is signalling a significant shift in drug policy towards a more abstinence-based approach to treatment, and proposals are being put forward to withdraw benefits from drug users who don't access treatment, the Commission says that tackling the extreme prejudice about addiction in society will be essential if the new government is to succeed in getting people recovering from drug dependency off benefits, back into work and playing a full role in society.

Author of the report Charlie Lloyd said: “There is no getting away from the fact that our current society is none too keen on drug users, and even former users, but such attitudes betray a lack of understanding about the nature of addiction which is having many profound effects. Use of heroin and crack, in particular, can be seen to come with a ‘stigma life sentence’ which is a crucial barrier to recovery and rejoining society. One way of moving towards greater compassion might be to learn lessons from the USA where every September the Governor of the State California (Arnold Schwarzenegger) holds a ‘recovery month’ to educate the public about addiction and the potential for people to overcome their drug problems.”

Lead Commissioner for the stigma project, Professor Colin Blakemore adds: ‘Junkie’ and ‘addict’ have become pejorative shorthand for perceived social decay, conveying a sense of anxiety out of proportion to reality, but such hostile attitudes only add to the barriers of escape from drug dependence. When drug use is

so common in our society we need to inform the public about the true nature of addiction so that addiction is no longer a lifelong handicap.

The six month stigma review - drawing from international and UK evidence - found:

- How we talk about drug users may affect how they are treated – a study in the US showed that mental health professionals shown descriptions of a person that differed only in whether they were described as a substance user or substance abuser - were more likely to suggest punitive actions towards the individual described as a substance abuser.
- Users report that stigmatising attitudes can have a profound impact on their lives, leading to feelings of low self-worth and the avoidance of contact with non-users. The supervised consumption of methadone in pharmacies provides a unique context in which users' status as 'problem drug users' are made public, with many feeling stigmatised by the attitudes of pharmacy staff and other customers.
- Attending a drug treatment agency can increase stigmatisation with some feeling that the very act of seeking treatment serves to cement an 'addict' or 'junkie' identity, leading to further rejection from family and friends.
- Street policing of problem drug users can be publicly humiliating and add to feelings of injustice, alienation and stigmatisation. For recovering users, the continued labelling of them as drug users makes moving on extremely difficult.

The study also highlights possible areas for action:

- Service user and advocacy groups becoming more active in challenging media reporting of drug addiction
- Education and information campaigns to help the public understand addiction problems
- Support for celebrities and iconic public figures to talk openly about their recovery from drug addiction
- Better training for professionals who come into contact with people with addiction problems
- Greater use of voluntary work placements schemes to get beyond the 'junkie' stereotypes and help people onto the employment ladder

ENDS

Notes to Editors

1. **'Sinning & Sinned Against: The Stigmatisation of Problem Drug Users'** by [Charlie Lloyd \(Senior Lecturer York University\)](#) is the first 'evidence' instalment of a longer research study which will also include: **i)** a public attitudes survey (modelled on the Department of Health annual attitudes to mental illness survey) **ii)** with a study of the experiences of users and families **iii)** an analysis of how drug users are portrayed in the media (Loughborough University)
2. Funding support for the review was provided by the [Paul Hamlyn Foundation](#) and part funded by the [Scottish Drugs Recovery Consortium](#) (SDRC)
3. The UK Drug Policy Commission is an independent, non-aligned and time limited charitable body set up with funding from the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation to enhance political and public understanding of the effective of policies aimed at dealing with the harms caused by illegal drugs
4. Charlie Lloyd is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Health Sciences, University of York. Prior to this he managed the alcohol and drugs research programme at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation having moved there following a period undertaking and managing a range of research at the Home Office.
5. Professor Colin Blakemore FMedSci (Professor of Neuroscience, Oxford) is a [member of the UK Drug Policy Commission](#)

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