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For World Drug Day

By Robert DuPont, Board Member World Federation Against Drugs

Although the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic are dominating our lives, let us not forget the equally deadly pandemic that continues to rage across the globe: drug abuse. This modern scourge, started in the late 1960's, continues to enslave and kill people of all nations in ever-changing ways. In Sweden, one of the first places the drug use pandemic hit, psychiatrist and professor Nils Bejerot worked with the Stockholm police to fight the rising tide of methamphetamine and heroin use. Dr. Bejerot saw that the government's initial response of providing users with physician-prescribed opioids and stimulants was futile. Not only did this policy fail to reduce drug use, but many of those drugs were diverted by users and ended up being sold on the street, leading to increased levels of drug use overall. Based on his first-hand experience with hundreds of patients, Dr. Bejerot concluded that providing addicts with drugs only prolonged their addiction and encouraged the spread of drug use throughout Swedish society. He saw that the only way to free users from the grip of addiction was to insist that they remain abstinent from all drugs. The world owes a debt of gratitude to Dr. Bejerot. Thanks to the instrumentality of his efforts over 50 years ago, Sweden's commitment to abstinence-based drug use prevention and treatment was born.

With such a history it comes as no surprise that in 2009 the World Federation Against Drugs (WFAD) was established in Stockholm to create a better drug policy vision for the world by building on the Swedish experience. This was a vision in stark contrast to the increasingly dominant view that the most appropriate public health response to addiction was "harm reduction." That strategy sought to reduce some of the harm produced by addictive drug use while permitting and even sometimes encouraging continued drug use.

WFAD is not opposed to harm reduction programs as a part of the response to the modern drug epidemic--as part of a continuum of care ending in treatment. However, WFAD insists that these programs be evaluated on the basis of their ability to help addicts become drug free. That means seeing harm reduction as a step toward eventual abstinence. Although facilitating drug use among addicts is better than allowing them to die from overdose, such use is not in their own long-term interest as it carries many serious risks to physical and mental health. Harm reduction without eventual recovery "enables" continued drug use and addiction. That is not in the interest of addicted people or the societies in which they live.

WFAD supports the use of medication-assisted treatment (MAT) for people suffering from opioid use disorders. When medications such as buprenorphine and methadone are used as prescribed and there is no other recreational or illicit use of substances, MAT patients are considered to be drug-free.

The UN Treaty on the Rights of the Child, the only UN treaty to focus on youth drug use, calls on all nations to help protect children from drugs. WFAD has the same clear goal for youth prevention as the ideal outlined in the treaty: that children be able grow up drug-

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free. For youth, there is no safe or healthy recreational use of drugs, including alcohol, nicotine or marijuana. This drug-free, no-use, goal is based on the recognition of the unique vulnerability of the developing adolescent brain to drug addiction.

WFAD celebrates and supports the growing Recovery Movement worldwide. The recent emergence of millions of people who have overcome their own drug addiction not only inspires a world confronted by epidemic levels of deadly drug use, but it also reinforces the notion that true recovery is drug-free. People in recovery are the pathfinders for modern drug policy; this large and rapidly growing population offers hope to all addicted people.

WFAD is a world leader in promoting drug-free solutions for health and well-being. Composed of a diverse global array of organizations and individuals working together to combat drug addiction, WFAD is the antidote to the modern drug epidemic.

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