

## Decriminalise use of drugs

### LETTERS

letters@thesunday.com

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THE world community is still perplexed by the complexity and challenges of drug addiction and drug use disorders. The idea that all drug use is dangerous, immoral and evil has led to stricter enforcement and extremely punitive policies in most nations. The consequences of detecting, arresting, prosecuting, and incarcerating drug users are devastating. The many ruined lives, destroyed families, and communities suffering due to harsh penalties imposed on users are costs that society cannot ignore.

The decriminalisation of drugs does not mean that users can get high in public. It does not mean that drug users can buy and sell with no fear of prosecution. It simply changes the way society deals with the problem of addiction from a legal to treatment perspective. The goal of social policy is to reduce potential harms and address the needs of mankind with beneficial solutions rather than punishing them.

Decriminalisation is not the same as legalisation. That does not, however, mean that drug use is legalised. The distribution and sale of drugs remain a criminal offence. This is where law enforcement can take a leading role. The possession of small amounts of drugs for personal consumption needs to be addressed as a public health problem and not as a criminal offence. Thus, if I were a policy-maker, I would with utmost urgency address the following question, "Should we decriminalise non-violent drug use?"

Many experts agree that drug addiction needs to be treated as a health problem and not a criminal matter. We need to manage addiction and allow addicts to live a normal life by taking methadone or another

substitute opioid or by enrolling them in intensive rehabilitation or treatment programmes. This will prevent overdosing, developing HIV, spreading other communicable diseases and being incarcerated, which would irrevocably alter the course of a person's life.

National social policy on drugs that are emerging treat drug use as a health problem instead of a crime.

Conservative politicians who once called needle exchange the work of the devil are now establishing them in their communities. Portugal decriminalised the personal use of all drugs (dealing and trafficking are still crimes and use remains illegal) in 2001. Its programme is the most comprehensive and the best-studied. Before the new millennium, Portugal was drowning in heroin and was flooded with drug dependence and drug use disorder. It had the worst HIV rates among injecting drug users in Europe. The country responded with very punitive drug laws, which had not helped. Indeed, the laws drove many users underground.

On July 1, 2001, Portugal decriminalised possession of less than 10 days' supply of any drug. The penalties are now dealt with administratively. This means a drug user is not processed as a criminal and will not be unduly exposed to the criminal justice system. When the police detect people using or possessing drugs, the drugs are seized. The drug user then meets a dissuasion commission within 72 hours. The commission has social workers, psychologists, sociologists and lawyers. This panel will then use the police report and assess the drug user. The panel can warn a user or send the user to appropriate social or health

services including drug treatment if the user is an addict. Those who refuse and/or repeat offenders will be punished. The punishment can be a fine, community service, or intensive supervision. Portugal's strategy is not only a successful model of criminal justice reform but also significant in harm reduction and public health response.

Decriminalisation of drug use needs to be complemented with serious commitment and increased investments in public health and emphasising evidence-based prevention; education and awareness on the risks of drug use and addiction; and accessibility to voluntary, affordable rehabilitation and treatment programmes and other social services.

Decriminalising personal drug use and possession will improve countless lives. Although it may not be the best solution it is better than labelling thousands of drug users as criminals. Their future is ruined through labelling and stigmatisation resulting in marginalisation and possibly criminal acts.

Law enforcement agencies must use their limited resources to focus on detecting, arresting and prosecuting those involved in the sale, processing, distribution and trafficking of drugs. We must put our collective consciousness together and face the truth and realities on the drug use scourge. It's the moral responsibility of government to enact this change for the health, safety and liberty of all citizens and legal residents.

**P. Sundramoorthy**  
Research Team on Crime  
and Policing  
School of Social Sciences  
Universiti Sains Malaysia