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Drug-related deaths in Scotland

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Last week the drugs death figures for Scotland for 2020 were published and yet again records were broken. There were 1,339 drug related deaths in Scotland in 2020, a 5% increase on the previous year and the largest number of drugs related deaths since records began in 1996. Drug deaths in Scotland are three and half time the rate for the UK as a whole and Greater Glasgow and Clyde was the Health Board with the highest drug death rate (National Records of Scotland, 2021).

Despite politicians playing the blame game, no one really knows for sure why Scotland in general and Glasgow in particular has such a serious drug problem. Illegal drugs are not the only health problem associated with Glasgow. The residents of Glasgow and the surrounding areas have lower life expectancy and poorer health than the residents of the rest of the United Kingdom. Even compared to other post-industrial cities such as Liverpool and Manchester, Glasgow has significantly higher mortality and morbidity (Glasgow Centre for Population Health, 2010). Several hypothesis have been suggested to explain this; these include a greater degree of deindustrialisation compared to other cities, poor social housing and religious sectarianism.

Whatever the cause or causes of poor health and a severe drug problem, solutions or tools need to be found that will reduce the drug related deaths in Glasgow and the rest of Scotland. One such tool that may possibly reduce drug deaths is a Medically Supervised Injecting Facility (MSIF).

MSIFs are facilities in which people can inject illicit drugs that they have acquired elsewhere, in a clean environment that is relatively safe, where there are doctors and nurses on site to give advice and initiate emergency medical treatment.

The world's first legally sanctioned drug consumption facility evolved in Berne, Switzerland in the late 1980s. A café had been set up for people who inject drugs who were unwelcome elsewhere. Customers of the café began to use it as a safe place to inject heroin and after discussion with law enforcement agencies, safe injecting in the cafe was legally sanctioned. According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA), as of April 2018 there were 93 MSIFs operating worldwide, 90 of them in Europe, 2 in Canada and 1 in Australia (European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, 2018, 3).

The Scottish Government has proposed the introduction of an MSIF in Glasgow. In 2017 a request was made to the Lord Advocate for an exemption to the Misuse of Drugs Act (1971) so that those using an MSIF would not be arrested for possession of illicit drugs. The Lord Advocate replied that he did not have the authority to grant such an exemption and the matter was referred to the Home Office. The Home Office stated that the UK Government had no intention to change the law to enable the establishment of an MSIF. The proposal remains in a legal deadlock

However, a former outreach worker established a mobile safe injecting space in Glasgow in 2020. In October 2020 Peter Krykant, who runs the service was charged with obstructing police officers and cautioned (Busby, 2020). Despite this, the police have not closed down this service and Mr Krykant continues to campaign for a change in the law so that a legally sanctioned MSIF can operate in Scotland (McGivern, 2020).

Whether or not Peter Krykant is successful in his campaign, something needs to change. A death rate that has been increasing since records began and is now at 1,339 in a year, is totally unacceptable. The introduction of an MSIF will not completely solve the problem but it will go some way to reducing the number of drugs related deaths in Scotland.

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