

Response

The importance of clearly communicating the essence of harm reduction

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Friedman et al., (2001) make the welcome general point that harm reductionists should seek and experiment with alliances involving other groups engaged in different, but associated, forms of social struggle. This is important because to do so offers the potential for both improving the understanding of harm reduction principles and conducting joint actions that can strengthen the harm reduction movement and make it, and others, more effective.

To improve public understanding of harm reduction we need to become better at communicating its principles – and considerable merits – and distinguishing it as a movement grounded in public health. This also implies being clearer about what harm reduction is not. We should be plain about the fact that it is not synonymous with drug law reform and drug user rights movements – even though these interests can coincide and some people (myself among them) have a commitment to each. Similarly, some activities, even impris-

onment, are sometimes (mis)represented as being harm reduction when they are better understood as part of a prohibitionist agenda. When working with other groups we need to protect harm reduction from such erosions of its meaning. To this end, Lenton and Single (1998) have provided one of the clearest definitions of our core principles and helped clarify what can legitimately claim to be harm reduction. By better articulating what harm reduction is, we will make it easier for others to understand where our interests coincide and how joint action can be undertaken. This particularly implies a responsibility for the harm reduction movement (through the International Harm Reduction Association) to better define and disseminate information about its principles: work that is already in hand. The analysis provided by Friedman et al., 2001 underline the argument for us to draw attention to the links between poverty, social exclusion and drug-related harm. I believe it is vital for our shared definition of harm reduction explicitly to acknowledge this relationship and the

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broad, social basis of much drug-related harm. By doing so, we enhance our ability to work alongside the different groups concerned with these self-same interests.

Although we may wish that more examples existed, it is heartening to see the ground-breaking work of groups such as HOT/Respect, IDUUT and family groups in Australia being celebrated. These important beginnings provide evidence that such approaches can work, and models for others to emulate and build on. This paper does a valuable job in collating these examples and enabling us to think more clearly about what else may be possible.

From my own 'local' perspective, I think an implication is that the narrow, drug problem-focus of many British needle exchange and methadone schemes should be shifted and more clearly positioned as essential partners in the efforts to reduce poverty and social exclusion. Not only would this better serve the wider needs of drug users – a primary objective – but it would also produce the useful, secondary benefit of helping defend services against an increasingly hostile British government by demonstrating how such services are necessary to New Labour's declared aim of reducing social exclusion.

The authors argue that "the class war is becoming two-sided again" in a way that suggests a return to previous patterns of conflict between labour and capital. Whilst I agree that there are signs of a renaissance in this struggle, its character seems to be fundamentally different as it now occurs within a markedly more globalised context; a point that is implicit throughout the paper.

More than any period before, the 1990s was the decade of the brands. Today, the urban poor in the industrialised world – those most affected by drug-related harm – are sold self-esteem and identity through the likes of \$150 Nike trainers and Tommy Hilfiger clothing: goods they can ill afford that are marketed

through sophisticated, cynical and aggressive global campaigns. These branded goods are produced by multinational corporations that have exported jobs from industrialised countries to the developing world. There, 'export processing zones' provide appalling labour conditions and work that rarely contributes to any enduring improvement in the economic lot of the majority of third world workers. Describing these processes Klein (2000, p. 370) acknowledges the place of drugs within this nexus and, in this way, indicates that anti-globalisation organisations are potentially valuable allies who may be sympathetic to our public health-based movement. Simultaneously, she makes it abundantly evident how, by participating in anti-globalisation activity, harm reductionists would be involved in an extension of harm reduction work that engages with some of the roots of the poverty that underpin the worst manifestations of drug-related harm.

This paper has helped me reflect on what the essence of harm reduction means to me – as a movement with a fundamental concern about poverty and the processes that produce and maintain it; to better appreciate our need to communicate and defend our central tenets and; it has stimulated my thinking about ways we can work with other groups at local, national and global levels. For these reasons, I see it as a valuable and practical contribution to our work and one that I hope will lead to other activity which we will, in time, trace back to this broadening of the understanding of what harm reduction means.

References

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