

ODYSSEAS: supervised use of drugs versus bureaucracy in Greece

Ulysses travelled for 10 years before returning to his home island of Ithaca to overthrow the contenders and rule with wisdom and justice. Despite evidence to the contrary, it could take Greece and its authorities 10 years to realise the need to maintain the investment in scaling up harm reduction services for injecting drug users. Previous authors^{1,2} have shown the increase in the number of newly diagnosed HIV infections among injecting drug users in Greece since early 2011. They have also shown the prompt response from the Greek authorities in 2011 and 2012 that led to an expansion of the capacity of the system to distribute clean needles and syringes and offer opioid substitution treatment. This service expansion was reflected in a substantial downward trend in new HIV cases among injecting drug users, from 213 in 2011 and 514 in 2012 to 239 in 2013 and 84 in 2014.³ However, there is an increased concern that these achievements might be fragile.

More specifically, as part of the expansion of harm reduction services, the Hellenic Organization Against

Drugs opened the first supervised facility for drug injection in 2013, aptly named ODYSSEAS (Ulysses), to offer injecting drug users early intervention in cases of overdose, coaching on infectious disease transmission, and a gateway to treatment and other care services.⁴

During the first 10 months of its operation, ODYSSEAS received 2501 visits from 330 unique injecting drug users. Medical and nursing staff effectively handled 103 cases of overdoses with not one fatality, reducing the incidence of fatal overdoses and, therefore, the mortality rate in this population. Also, more than 100 unique referrals were noted to a range of drug-related treatment services, thus expanding the reach of these complimentary services directly to injecting drug users on the street. Additionally, the ODYSSEAS street service, manned with social workers, psychologists, socio-therapists, and street workers reached out to more than 3500 injecting drug users, contributing substantially to the effect of harm reduction measures on the reduction in HIV incidence. Before it had completed a year in operation, ODYSSEAS was stranded in August 2014 due to increasing bureaucratic hurdles from the new administration of the Hellenic Organization Against

Drugs and the Greek Ministry of Health, which have been stalling the establishment of a well-defined, legally sound framework for the provision of harm reduction services.

Although the HIV outbreak among injecting drug users in 2011 was promptly and effectively managed, the success of curbing the outbreak might be fragile if Greek authorities do not remain vigilant, strengthening harm reduction interventions. It might be high time Ulysses sets sail for Ithaca again.

We declare no competing interests.

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