

13 of 119 DOCUMENTS

Orlando Sentinel (Florida)

December 21, 2010 Tuesday
FINAL**Portugal: Rethink addiction approach
Decriminalizing personal narcotics helped turn corner****BYLINE:** Kate Kelland, Reuters**SECTION:** A SECTION; FLORIDA; Pg. A9**LENGTH:** 369 words

LONDON -- Governments need to accept that narcotics abuse will never be eradicated and instead treat addiction like a chronic disease, says the top drug official for Portugal, which decriminalized drugs a decade ago.

Dr. Joao Castel-Branco Goulao said viewing drug addiction as an illness like heart disease or diabetes allows policymakers to see addicts not as criminal junkies but as sick people who need health care.

"Every civilization has its drugs," he said. "It's a chronic disease, and we have to deal with it in the same way ... by providing the most up-to-date treatments."

While drug trafficking remains a criminal offense in Portugal, since 2001 authorities have dispensed with arrests, trials and prison for people carrying an amount considered a personal supply of any drug from marijuana to heroin. Efforts have instead been focused on prevention messages and treatment.

Almost 10 years on, Goulao, who also heads the European Monitoring Center for Drugs and Drug Addiction, said Portugal is the focus of international interest. Delegations from Norway, Australia, Peru, Colombia and Mexico, among others, have visited, and he has been invited to speak in the United States and Great Britain.

Critics of decriminalization had warned it would make Portugal a paradise for "drug tourists" and encourage use by children.

But Goulao cites a report by the **Cato Institute** that found that in the five years after decriminalization, rates of illegal drug use among teenagers in Portugal dropped and rates of new HIV infections among drug users fell. The 2009 report described Portuguese decriminalization as a "resounding success" that "should guide drug policy debates around the world."

Goulao said the number of addicts has halved from 1990s levels, to about 50,000, about 40,000 of whom are in treatment.

But he warns against seeing decriminalization as a quick fix. He stresses the importance of changing attitudes first, investing in treatment, prevention and so-called harm-reduction measures like needle exchanges and drug substitutes.

"I don't attribute any magical property to decriminalization on its own," he said. "It's the whole package. If you want to change the paradigm, you have to change

everything."

LOAD-DATE: December 21, 2010

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC:

BOX: Still not legal

"Decriminalization" means drug possession for personal use is deemed an administrative violation. Drug trafficking is still prosecuted as a criminal offense.

SOURCE:

Cato Institute

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

Copyright 2010 Sentinel Communications Co.