

*Drug treatment South China Morning Post May 3, 2009 Sunday*

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Much hand-wringing has accompanied Jill Vidal's brief incarceration in Japan and return home to Hong Kong following her arrest for heroin possession but there has been very little serious debate about how best to deal with a problem that - let's face it - is not going to go away.

Most developed societies try to tackle illegal-drug taking aggressively - but with little success (assuming "success" means helping those in the grip of an addiction, of course). Take, for example, the United States, which has been waging a "war on drugs" since 1971. The country has spent an estimated \$500US billion to clean up its streets since then but most types of drug are as cheap and plentiful as ever and nearly 500,000 people are behind bars for drug crimes.

One country that has attempted to think outside the box is Portugal. In 2001, the country decriminalised all drugs, including cocaine and heroin. Drug possession for personal use is still prohibited but violations are deemed to be administrative rather than criminal; therapy (which may be refused, with no repercussions) is offered instead of a jail term. According to a recent **Cato Institute** report, the move has been a success and "there is no real debate about whether drugs should once again be criminalised" in Portugal.

"Although ... usage rates have remained roughly the same or even decreased slightly ... drug-related pathologies - such as sexually transmitted diseases and deaths due to drug usage - have decreased dramatically," says the report. "Experts attribute those positive trends to the enhanced ability of the Portuguese government to offer treatment programmes to its citizens - enhancements made possible, for numerous reasons, by decriminalisation." Vidal is being urged to seek help to quit. She might have already done so had she been Portuguese.