The Hidden Hepatitis C Epidemic

June 4, 2013 By Lucinda K. Porter RN

I just read the May 2013 Report of the Global Commission on Drug Policy, *The Negative Impact of the War on Drugs on Public Health: The Hidden Hepatitis C Epidemic*. I am stirred up. This report is a call to action to reform governmental drug policy. Recommendations include the decriminalization of drug use, and implementation of programs that provide access to safe, drug programs that reduce hepatitis C transmission.

The report reinforced what I know, and resurrected feelings that have long occupied my view of the world. What disturbed me is that in the past few years I have felt discouraged, living with a hopeless attitude, wondering if I will live to see a humane approach to drug policy. I have become complacent.

What opened the door to hope was to read the list of highly regarded world leaders who served on this global commission. A few luminaries on the list are Kofi Annan, (former Secretary General of the United Nations), Richard Branson (Virgin Group founder), Paul Volcker (former Chairman of the US Federal Reserve), and seven former presidents. The committee was chaired by George Shultz. Yes, George Shultz who served in the Nixon and Reagan cabinets, and was an adviser to George W. Bush. Shultz has been a longtime advocate for the legalization of drugs. In an article in the *New York Times* (June 8, 1998), Shultz signed an advertisement that read, “We believe the global war on drugs is now causing more harm than drug abuse itself.”

The report is a scathing indictment of how the ’war on drugs’ and repressive drug policies are failing to lower hepatitis C transmission rates. “The silence about the harms of repressive drug policies has been broken - they are ineffective, violate basic human rights, generate violence, and expose individuals and communities to unnecessary risks. Hepatitis C is one of these harms - yet it is both preventable and curable when public health is the focus of the drug response. Now is the time to reform.” (Excerpt from the report’s executive summary).

As a hepatitis C advocate, I ask, what can I do to make a difference? Although I feel called to increase awareness about hepatitis C, the unvarnished truth is that until we declare peace on drug use, hepatitis C will continue to do what it does best--infect and destroy. I recommend reading the report, and then ask, what can I do to make a difference?

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