

TACKLING ADDICTION

From Belfast to Lisbon: an in-depth insight

Time for a **health emergency** to be declared

It has been a pleasure and a challenge to oversee this issue on addiction. I've talked to some amazing people and organisations along the way.

But the reality is that to effectively tackle and provide support to people who have an addiction to substances such as heroin, cocaine, and prescription medicines, we need to come up with innovative solutions and matching funding.

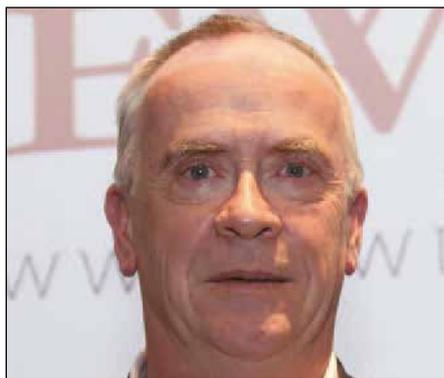
I also believe that a health emergency and a health-first policy needs to be put in place in order to try and stem the number of drug-related deaths.

The families and friends who have lost loved ones deserve to know that they have our support and a desire to set up structures and facilities that will fully support them.

The obstacles though are huge.

We already know that the Executive and the Assembly are talking about budgetary constraints when it comes to funding decisions. The talk from some politicians of having to make 'tough decisions' is being heard more frequently.

And yet, if we continue to offer a very uneven delivery of services with long waiting times, then we know what the outlook will be – more pain and tears from those whose husbands, wives, brothers and sisters are dying.



VIEW editor Brian Pelan

My research for this magazine led me to Lisbon in Portugal.

In the 1990s, Portugal was in the grip of heroin addiction which affected all sectors of society. The country also had the highest rate of HIV infection in the entire European Union.

In 2001, nearly two decades later, Portugal became the first country to decriminalise the possession and consumption of all illicit substances and witnessed a huge reduction in drug use. Rather than being arrested, those caught with a personal supply might be given a warning, a small fine, or told to appear

before a local commission – a doctor, a lawyer and a social worker – to hear about treatment, harm reduction, and support services that are available to them.

I interviewed the country's Drugs and Alcohol National Coordinator João Goulão and a frontline organisation called Crescer for this issue of **VIEW**.

"The decriminalisation policy change was based on the idea that drug addiction is mostly a health and social issue rather than a criminal/justice issue," said Mr Goulão.

"Decriminalisation was important because it meant that the country moved away from the stigma and segregation of people to a more inclusive set of policies for drug users."

My interviews with Mr Goulão and Crescer are on pages 12 to 15.

I would have liked to have interviewed the Minister for Health Robin Swann for this issue, but, despite numerous requests to the Department of Health press office, I could not secure one.

Finally, I would like to pay a special tribute to Kerry Anthony, Chief Executive of Inspire Wellbeing, and Alex Bunting, Director of Addiction Services, Addiction NI. This magazine on addiction would not have been possible without their invaluable support.

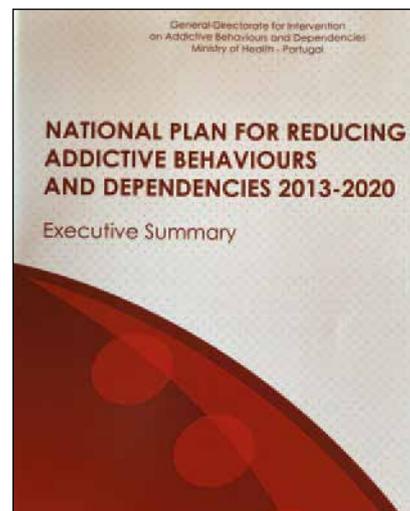
INSIGHT INTO PORTUGAL'S ADDICTION FIGHT



Above: João Goulão, the Drugs and Alcohol National Coordinator in Portugal, at his office in Lisbon



João Goulão with VIEW editor Brian Pelan



A health first policy

VIEW editor Brian Pelan travelled to Lisbon in Portugal to hear at first hand from the country's Drugs and Alcohol National Coordinator João Goulão on how they have led the way in Europe on tackling addiction-related issues

I left Ireland just as Storm Ciara was hitting Ireland and the UK. All my research on addiction for this issue of **VIEW** had shown that a visit to Portugal was a must. I was keen to find out how the country had found its way out of a heroin epidemic that had ravaged many of its inhabitants. I also wanted to know what lessons can we learn from its harm reduction policies.

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I met João Goulão at the offices of SICAD (The Intervention Service on Addictive Behaviors and Dependencies) in Lisbon. He is credited as being one of the architects of Portugal's drug policy which was established in 2000.

From 2009 to 2015, he served as chairman of the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction and has been a delegate at the United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

How important was it for Portugal to decriminalise drug consumption in 2001, I asked João?

"The policy change was based on the idea that drug addiction is mostly a health and social issue rather than a criminal/justice issue. Decriminalisation was important because it meant that the country moved away from the stigma and segregation of people to a more inclusive set of policies for drug users.

"Decriminalisation, along with a set of other policies (prevention, treatment, harm reduction and reintegration) led us to an improvement in indicators for overdoses, HIV infection and criminality since our strategy was put in place."

Was there much opposition to these

Facts about drugs policy in Portugal

- **The only thing that most outsiders know about Portugal's laws is that all drugs for personal use are decriminalised. But what many fail to understand is that all drugs, other than alcohol and tobacco, remain illegal.**

- **If police find you with illicit drugs, you'll be arrested and taken to a police station where the drugs will be weighed. If the amount is above the strictly enforced threshold limits — designed to be a 10-day supply for personal use, or 25 grams of cannabis, five grams of cannabis resin, two grams of cocaine, or one gram each of ecstasy or heroin — you can be charged as a trafficker. If convicted,**

jail terms range from one year to 14 years.

- **If the amount is below the limit, you'll be sent to the Commission for the Dissuasion of Drug Addiction — even if you're a tourist. There, you will be interviewed by a psychologist or social worker before appearing before a three-person panel that will offer suggestions aimed at stopping your drug use.**

- **From there, you're fast-tracked to whatever services you're willing to accept. If you refuse help, you can be asked to do community service or even, eventually, facing a fine, perhaps even having possessions confiscated and sold to pay the fine.**

policies from politicians and other people who argued that decriminalisation would encourage drug use?

"Yes. It was discussed at our parliament," replied João. "You had left-wing parties supporting the idea and conservatives opposing it who argued that drug use would increase, children would start using drugs, and that 'Portugal would become a paradise for drugs users'.

"But now no one in Portugal keeps to that idea. Today there is a broad consensus about the benefits of decriminalisation.

"Following the world economic crash in 2008 we had a bit of a relapse with people going back to injecting drugs. After a lot of discussion we have opened our first mobile safe injecting facility in Lisbon and we are preparing the opening of two more fixed facilities in the city. We may also open one in Porto."

I was curious to know what type of help is available if you have a drug addiction issue in Portugal.

"Treatment is free in Portugal. We have a quite solid network of centres throughout the country," said João. "It's an

open door policy for free. The outpatient clinics are the gateway to the system.

"Help for people is very fast. We do not have a big waiting list."

What is the situation like in Portugal when it comes to alcohol consumption?

"Alcohol use is the most severe addictive issue that we have in Portugal. We have recently seen some improvement among young people. There is still a huge acceptance of using alcohol in our culture."

He also said that people becoming addicted to prescribed opioids was not a huge issue in Portugal at the moment.

"We have a quite different tradition when it comes to prescribing opiates to the US and other countries as our doctors are very cautious about prescribing.

"It is not an issue now but we are anticipating that it might arise given the situation that people can now order opiates on the internet."

"Our overall policy is about trying to focus on the needs of each citizen. Drug addiction is not a crime. It does not improve with imprisonment."

INSIGHT INTO PORTUGAL'S ADDICTION FIGHT



Américo Nave, Executive Director at Crescer, left with psychologists Rita Lopes and Mariana Santos

Treating people with dignity ...

Brian Pelan visits a vital outreach service in the heart of Lisbon

Hidden away in a narrow street in Lisbon, with clothes hanging from the washing lines of apartments, is the offices of Crescer – an outreach NGO which is specifically focused on harm-reduction practices

One of the first people I met was psychologist Rita Lopes.

“We have three outreach teams in Crescer,” said Rita. “Two of the teams work with people who use drugs and the third one works with homeless people. My team works in the main neighbourhoods where the consumption and trafficking of drugs take place.”

Since 2001, the Crescer outreach team has worked in Lisbon’s suburbs. They provide heroin and cocaine addicts with what they need for safer consumption: clean needles, tinfoil and psychological support. Each year, they help thousands of users.

“This is very important as our philosophy at Crescer is harm reduction,” said Rita.

What is the situation like now in Portugal, I asked her?

“Things have improved a lot since the law was changed in 2001.

“People have more access to services and are treated with a more dignified and human way. They have free access to health services.

“Twenty years ago we used to see people in the streets without legs and arms. Today we don’t see that.”

How long have you been working here, I asked?

“I have been working in Crescer for four years. I did my Masters in criminal psychology. I then worked for a year in prison and then I joined Crescer.

“If a person comes to us and says they want to quit drugs we might send them to a therapeutic community. They can stay in the facility for one year. It’s like a farm and is outside Lisbon.

“There are 13 projects at Crescer with a staff of 50 people. We are funded by SICAD (The Intervention Service on



Putting food on the table

“If you give a man a fish, he eats for a day. If you teach a man to fish, he eats for a lifetime” – With this saying as their guiding philosophy, Crescer set up a restaurant where homeless people with addiction-related issues could gain professional experience and training that would allow them to integrate into the community and find a job. In other words, tools for a better future.

Américo Nave, Executive Director at Crescer, said: “We believe that É Um Restaurante is good for the recovery of homeless people. We have psychologists working with them.

“Crescer is also fortunate to have a top Portuguese chef, Nuno Bergonse, overseeing the restaurant.”

Addictive Behaviors and Dependencies) and other private funding.

“We also have a Housing First project which started in 2013. It’s for people who have experienced chronic homelessness and who have drug issues. We give them a house as we think a home is a basic human right and then we give them 24/7 help for a year with a team which supports them. The main goal of this project is to integrate the person into the community.”

Crescer is also in favour of Drug Consumption Rooms.

On their website (<http://crescer.org/en/the-association/>) it

says: “Although there is a groundbreaking legal framework and drug consumption has been decriminalised in Portugal, we are still confronted with consumption out in the open, which lacks health conditions. Assisted drug consumption rooms have proved to be another valid strategy for harm reduction: reducing risks of contagious infectious diseases, reducing deaths by overdose, consolidating health education and promoting contact with other social and health facilities.”

Crescer also operates a mobile consumption room in Lisbon but has lobbied the government for more of these facilities to be opened.