

Opinion – Drug deaths shame continues

Opinion article by Douglas McBean, an ambassador for the Labour Party Campaign for Drug Policy Reform and a lay member of the Scottish Parliament APPG on Drugs and Alcohol Misuse. He was formerly an outreach and drop in volunteer with Crew Mind Altering and a trustee on the charity's board. He volunteered with young person homeless charity, Centrepoin Soho, while living in London.

Mr McBean writes:

I left the Labour Party recently for a myriad of reasons.

I am no fan of Boris Johnson but loved though his performance at Prime Minister's Questions each Wednesday when he insisted on using Scottish Nationalist Party, duly resulting in the SNP's then leader, Ian Blackford, to cough and splutter and complain to the Speaker Sir Lindsay Hoyle. He in turn mostly laughed behind his hand.

Notwithstanding, I am not going to let the SNP off the hook on their drugs deaths shame.

You don't need to take my word that the SNP are failing, and much of the drug misuse deaths lie fairly and squarely at the feet of the nationalists.

Just look at what the independent Auditor General wrote on March 8, 2022:

"Drug and alcohol services in Scotland, provide further evidence of Scotland's growing problem with drug and alcohol misuse. Drug and alcohol-related death rates are among the highest in Europe and have doubled in the past 15 years."

The SNP have been in Government here in Scotland of course during this time.

So when I further read from the report of the Auditor General I shall shed no tears for Ms Sturgeon in exiting, or her ilk:

"Progress addressing these challenges has been slow since we first reported on drug and alcohol services in 2009, with a lack of drive and leadership by the Scottish Government".

I wonder if the SNP leader replacing Ms Sturgeon (there is little talent to choose from and God help us were it the drug minister Angela Constance, she of course did not throw her hat in the ring.) will do any better? They must.

Overdose Prevention Centres (OPCs) are being talked about and Labour MSP Paul Sweeney's Drug Death Prevention Bill is good news but if the SNP care about and serious about reducing drug related deaths then at any time they could have brought forward (and still could) a government bill, faster and more likely to succeed than a private member's bill coming from the back benches.

I feel very strongly that in Scotland and elsewhere OPCs should do what they say on the tin, prevent intravenous drug use overdoses and deaths. No one has ever died in an OPC anywhere in the world, spectacular. But I reasonably suggest

too that anyone waking up from say heroin use is unlikely to want to talk there and then about childhood trauma etc, no matter how relevant that is in their problematic drug use. They need to be signposted for help.

Given the cost of living pressures, arising from both the Conservative government in Westminster and the SNP government in Holyrood I do not believe either government will stretch funds to achieve the amazing work done by Sam Rivera, CEO of OnPoint in New York City. OnPoint has been in existence a mere 18 months and goes beyond preventing overdoses, its services include an OPC and also drop in centres, harm reduction services, health and wellness services, outreach and public safety and other support services.

Speaking to experts in Scotland and across the UK there is a huge desire to replicate what Sam is doing in New York City but I see no desire, political will or money from the SNP. How can they, when their significant energies and single policy is directed towards so called independence? Please, not in my lifetime.

For me, let's get on with OPCs, they do not need a huge amount of money if they "stick to their knitting". Users self-injecting under supervision do not need highly trained medics/doctors. Trained nurses or even volunteers fit the bill in my opinion.

Meanwhile Naloxone is a medication used to reverse the effect of opioid overdose, anyone can learn to use it online. Here in Edinburgh there is a multitude of agencies that can provide one-to-one training, it takes 15 minutes max, for use in an OPC or anywhere else, even your local shopping centre.

Please consider this, 1,330 people lost their lives in Scotland during 2021 arising from drug overdoses. Absolutely heartbreaking at least 852 babies were born addicted to illicit drugs in Scotland since 2017. Babies exposed to drugs

in the womb can suffer from neonatal abstinence syndrome as they withdraw after they are born, and the symptoms include uncontrollable trembling, seizures and high-pitched crying.

I am awaiting a response to a Freedom of Information request as to how many drug-related amputations have taken place arising from intravenous drug use.

Douglas McBean is a freelance writer and drug policy reform activist living in Edinburgh.

(Mr McBean is an ambassador for the Labour Party Campaign for Drug Policy Reform and a lay member of the Scottish Parliament APPG on Drugs and Alcohol Misuse. He was formerly an outreach and drop in volunteer with Crew Mind Altering and a trustee on the charity's board. He volunteered with young person homeless charity, Centrepoint Soho, whilst living in London.)

