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Revolutionary drug policy pays off

In 2000, one per cent of Portugal's population was addicted to illegal drugs. To overcome the problem, the Portuguese decriminalised the use of all drugs, and now, a decade on, the results are unbelievable, write **BARRY HATTON** and **MARTHA MENDOZA**

THese days, Casal Ventoso is an ordinary blue-collar community. Mothers push baby strollers, men smoke outside cafes, buses chug up and down the cobble main street.

Ten years ago, the Lisbon neighbourhood was a hellhole, a "drug supermarket" where more than 5,000 users lined up every day to buy heroin and sneak into a hillside honeycomb of derelict housing to shoot up. In dark, stinking corners, addicts staggered between the occasional corpse, scavenging used, bloody needles.

At that time, Portugal, like the junkies of Casal Ventoso, had hit rock bottom. An estimated 100,000 people — an astonishing one per cent of its population — were addicted to illegal drugs.

So, like anyone with little to lose, the Portuguese took a risky leap: they decriminalised the use of all drugs in a groundbreaking law in 2000.

Drugs in Portugal are still illegal, but it changed the law so that users are sent to counselling and sometimes treatment, instead of criminal courts and prison. The switch from drugs as a criminal issue to a public health one was aimed at preventing users from going underground.

Other European countries treat drugs as a public health problem, too, but Portugal stands out as the only one that has written that approach into law. The result: more people tried drugs, but fewer ended up addicted.

Here's what happened between 2000 and 2008:

- There were small increases in illicit drug use among adults, but decreases for adolescents and problem users such as

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drug addicts and prisoners.

- Drug-related court cases dropped 66 per cent.

- Drug-related HIV cases dropped 75 per cent. In 2002, 49 per cent of people with AIDS were addicts; by 2008 that number fell to 28 per cent.

- The number of regular users held steady at less than three per cent of the population for marijuana and less than 0.3 per cent for heroin and cocaine — figures that show decriminalisation brought no surge in drug use.

- The number of people treated for drug addiction rose 20 per cent from 2001 to 2008.

Portuguese Prime Minister Jose Socrates, one of the chief architects of the new drug strategy, says he was inspired partly by his own experience of helping his brother beat an addiction.

“It was a very hard change to make at the time because the drug issue involves lots of prejudices. You need to rid yourself of prejudice and take an intelligent approach.”

In Portugal today, outreach health workers provide addicts with fresh needles, swabs, little dishes to cook up the injectable mixture, disinfectant and condoms. But anyone caught with even a small amount of drugs is automatically sent to what is known as a Dissuasion Committee for counselling.

The committees include legal experts, psychologists and social workers. Failure to turn up can result in fines, mandatory treatment or other sanctions. In serious cases, the panel recommends the user be sent to a treatment centre.

Portugal’s programme is widely seen as effective, but some say it has shortcomings.

Antonio Lourenco Martins is a former Portuguese Supreme Court judge who sat on a 1998 commission that drafted the new drug strategy and was one

of two on the nine-member panel who voted against decriminalisation. He admits the law has done some good, but complains that its approach is too soft.

Worldwide, a record 93 countries offered alternatives to jail time for drug abuse this year, according to the International Harm Reduction Association. They range from needle exchanges in Cambodia to methadone treatment in Poland.

Vancouver, Canada, has North America’s first legal drug consumption room — dubbed as “a safe, health-focused place where people inject drugs and connect to healthcare services”.

Brazil and Uruguay have eliminated jail time for people carrying small amounts of drugs for personal use. Whether the alternative approaches work seems to depend on how they are carried out.

In the Netherlands, where police ignore the peaceful consumption of illegal drugs, drug use and dealing are rising, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

Five Dutch cities are implementing new restrictions on marijuana cafes after a wave of drug-related gang violence.

However, in Switzerland, where addicts are supervised as they inject heroin, addiction has steadily declined. No one

has died from an overdose there since the programme began in 1994, according to medical studies. The programme is also credited with reducing crime and improving addicts’ health.

The Obama administration firmly opposes the legalisation of drugs. The United States is spending US\$74 billion (RM229 million) this year on criminal and court proceedings for drug offenders, compared with US\$3.6 billion for treatment.

But even the US has taken small steps toward Portugal’s approach of more intervention and treatment programmes, and White House drug czar Gil Kerlikowske has called for an end to the “War on Drugs” rhetoric.

“Calling it a war really limits your resources,” he said. “Looking at this as both a public safety problem and a public

health problem seems to make a lot more sense.”

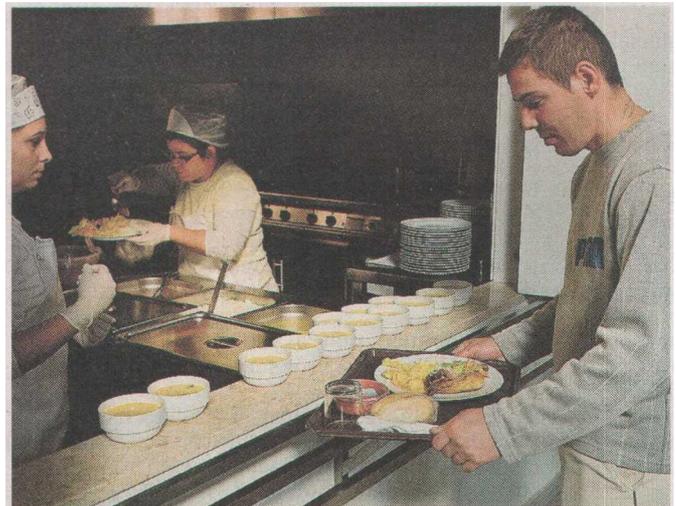
There is no guarantee that Portugal’s approach would work in the US, which has a population 29 times larger than Portugal’s 10.6 million.

Still, an increasing number of American cities are offering non-violent drug offenders a chance to choose treatment over jail, and the approach appears to be working.

In San Francisco, hundreds who landed in a court programme this year were offered a chance to go to rehab, get jobs, move into houses, find primary care physicians and even remove their tattoos. There is enough data now to show that these alternative courts reduce recidivism and save money.

In Portugal, the blight that once destroyed the Casal Ventoso neighbourhood is a distant memory. There are vestiges, however. About a dozen frail, unkempt men recently gathered next to a bus stop to get new needles and swabs in small green plastic bags from health workers, as part of a twice-weekly programme.

The decayed housing that once hid addicts has long since been bulldozed. This year, Lisbon’s city council planted 600 trees and 16,500 bushes on the hillside. This spring, they’re expected to bloom. — AP



A former drug addict picks up his lunch from the kitchen of a treatment centre in Lisbon, Portugal.