



Europe's new hard line on drugs

ITALY has become the latest country to join the backlash against drugs liberalisation in Europe after unveiling plans to lock up cannabis users and seize clubbers' passports.

A bill drawn up by hard right prime minister Gianfranco Fini abolishes distinctions between "hard" and "soft" drugs and introduces stiff penalties for possession of small amounts of cannabis and ecstasy. Fini said the tough policy was needed because of the increasing strength of cannabis being smoked.

The new clampdown on drug users in Italy comes in the wake of a revival of conservative, zero-tolerance policies across Europe. France's right wing interior minister Nicolas Sarkozy has proposed on the spot fines of up to £1,000 and compulsory therapy for cannabis users after a report found police only prosecuted eight per cent of cannabis users they stopped. He said, with 10 million people who say they have ever used the drug, France has become the "European champions of cannabis".

In Spain the government of Jose Maria Aznar has tabled plans to limit the freedom of people or organisations which discuss drugs issues. The government wants to outlaw those who "try to invite young people to consume" drugs, a group which it says includes magazine publishers, makers of hemp products, T-shirt sellers and public speakers.

As the UK gears up for the downgrading of cannabis to a Class C drug on January 30, even the Dutch, the standard bearers of liberal drug policy in Europe, are backpeddling. The country's conservative government wants to ban foreigners from its cannabis shops in a bid to end 'drug tourism' and clean up Holland's image.

"There has been a general drawing back on drug policy in Europe in line with a return to power of right wingers in coalition governments," says Joep Oomen, heads of the European NGO Council on Drugs (ENCOD). "And some have chosen the issue of drugs as a way of re-establishing conservative ideas about society."

Heroin treatment trial launched

THE first large-scale UK trial of intravenous treatment for problem heroin users will begin later this year. The controversial three year study, criticised in the right wing press because it received £500,000 in lottery funding from the Community Fund, will be carried out by the National Addiction Centre. It aims to stabilise 100 drug users through injectable heroin and methadone as an alternative to oral methadone. Once signed up for treatment, patients will randomly be given either oral methadone with increased dosage, enhanced intravenous methadone, or heroin in clinical doses. If it proves successful, the treatment could be rolled out nationally.

Tom Waller 1944–2003



AS a GP in Suffolk, influential member of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, founding member of the UK Harm Reduction Alliance (UKHRA) and Action on Hepatitis C, Tom wrote pioneering books on the role of the GP in treatment and campaigned tirelessly and effectively for better treatment for drinkers and drug users, often in the face of official resistance and indifference.

He always believed that drug and alcohol use were health problems and fought against the government's short-sighted emphasis on crime reduction. He believed passionately in harm reduction and in 2001

UKHRA established an annual award for significant contribution to the development of harm reduction policy and practice in the UK, which was named after him.

Tom had been fighting cancer for a long time and in the last 2 years had become increasingly frail, but even this did not stop him from fighting for improvement in treatment. The last time I saw him was only 2 weeks before his death at a meeting at the RCGP about improving methadone prescribing. He joked that he may have to come back from the other side for the next meeting.

I loved and was inspired by his passion for change, which was always coupled with serene politeness and patience. He will be greatly missed by me and so many others in the field.

Chris Ford

in brief

Watchdogs lick Rizla advert

The advertising watchdog has banned an ad campaign for Rizla cigarette papers after ruling it could be seen as condoning cannabis smoking. The Advertising Standards Authority launched an investigation into the advert which showed a packet of Rizlas twisted at one end with the words 'twist and burn'. A rival manufacturer complained the campaign was a "clear allusion to drug culture" because it said joints are twisted at one end. Imperial Tobacco, the makers of Rizla, insisted its papers were intended solely for handmade cigarettes although it was aware a "minority" used Rizlas with soft drugs.

Tetanus alert

The Health Protection Agency is warning injecting drug users to get vaccinations following an outbreak of tetanus infections. The HPA said users who inject drugs in the muscle or just below the skin are especially at risk from the potentially lethal infection. The warnings about tetanus, which causes lockjaw and painful muscle spasms, come after nine injecting drug users have been diagnosed with tetanus since July last year.

Victims of war

Amnesty International has called on the Thai government to reveal the identities of the 2,245 people it claims were killed during a crackdown on drugs between February and April last year. Amnesty said a list of victims would allow relatives and activists to monitor the progress of investigations into the killings. Last month, the king of Thailand said in his birthday speech that a full investigation into the killings should be undertaken and the results made public.

Doctors call for gym drug checks

The British Medical Association has urged ministers to consider licensing gyms in order to tackle the rise in anabolic steroid use. The BMA's call for a system of gym inspections follows an investigation by the *Guardian* newspaper which revealed boys as young as 14 taking steroids.