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Are we winning the war on drugs? Portugal's choice to decriminalize brought on new problems



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ADDICTIONS & ANSWERS

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Armando Franca/AP

A drug addict holds used needles to exchange for new ones in Lisbon's Casal Ventoso district.

BILL: In the 1980s, drug abuse in [Portugal](#) hit catastrophic levels. According to a [recent article in the New Yorker](#), "The [Lisbon](#) government responded in the usual way—increasing sentences for convictions and spending more money on investigations and prosecutions. Matters only grew worse. In 1999, nearly one per cent of the population—a hundred thousand people—were heroin addicts, and Portugal reported the highest rate of drug-related AIDS deaths in the [European Union](#)."

DR DAVE: And so they took a desperate gamble: In July of 2001, Portugal became the first country to fully decriminalize personal drug use. Sounds right up your "Let's legalize drugs" alley, Bill.

BILL: By taking the forbidden glamour out of drugs, Portuguese authorities report their abuse went down, especially among young people. Plus, their jail population number is falling, as are the country's drug-related deaths. What's wrong with that? Or am I being naive?

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Maybe just marijuana.

Absolutely not.

I'm not sure.

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DR. DAVE: What is naïve is to think that legalization's impact can be clearly identified by the elusive statistic of "reduction of drug abuse in youth."

BILL: What statistic do you prefer?

DR. DAVE: I prefer to look at actual social impact. One of the interwoven parts of drug abuse, is that many addicted women can only trade their bodies for the next fix—decriminalized or not. [A study released this week](#) shows that Portugal, ten years after that decriminalization law, is facing a crisis of women entering prostitution.

BILL: Your case is that by removing fear of jail time, legalization discourages addicts from seeking treatment? With a consequent erosion of community health standards often overlooked in the public policy debates?

DR. DAVE: Do you know that the abuse and over-use of legally sold prescription pills has become a bigger health problem in the [USA](#) than narcotics or cocaine?

BILL: But what makes you think passing stricter laws will make it stop? It would only increase the black market price, and so the profit. The fact is we have lost that copywriter's dream, "The War on Drugs."

DR. DAVE: What frustrating is there is no real research from the [World Health Organization](#) or other credibly neutral party. The legalize drug think tank -- the [CATO Institute](#), -- has [reworked some numbers](#) to gloss over the fact that Portugal's teen drug use was less than 25% of ours to begin with. Where they were struggling was in heroin addiction. Do you know how they improved those statistics?

BILL: By moving their addicts onto [methadone](#)?

DR. DAVE: With a subsequent 246% increase in that kind of legal opiate addiction. Now they don't have to count them as a casualty in their war on drug addiction. Actually, Bill, whether we like it or not, and I sure don't—16 states and the [District of Columbia](#) have embarked on high stakes social research in legalizing marijuana. That's where it's becoming used not only for terminal cancer patients but for any discomfort, physical and/or emotional.

BILL: Well, Doc, if we can't look to Portugal to understand our own country's needs; and our current medical marijuana initiatives are evolving and changing rapidly—what do you suggest my view on decriminalizing or legalizing drugs should be?

DR. DAVE: We all ---especially parents --need to seriously look at the data as it comes in, both pro and con. Debate it, think about it and be politically active about your views.

BILL: Who has the time and energy to do that? How do you know what political agenda might be diluting the objective information.

DR. DAVE: I have looked over countless websites and there is one that keeps standing out above all the rest — [MedicalMarijuana.ProCon.org](#). It does a good job presenting both sides of the debate, along with what all 16 states and DC are actually doing with the use of marijuana. It's not perfect, but I find it to be incredibly popular with my graduate students on both sides of the issue.

BILL: I never cared for pot, even in my college years, but I can tell you that when I went to the site, I was there for over an hour—fascinating what the medical uses are in the different states. It even keeps up with general marijuana information and research as it becomes available.

DR. DAVE: It's a website I hope the teens bring to their classes and family dinner tables. It may take a few parental debate losses to wake up the adults in this country.

BILL: I was actually thinking of a university professor who may regret the day he added this knowledge to my legalize pot debates with him....

Dr. David Moore is a licensed psychologist and chemical dependency professional who is a graduate school faculty member at Argosy University's Seattle Campus. Bill Manville's most recent work, "Cool, Hip & Sober," is available at online bookstores. A Book of the Month novelist too, Bill privately teaches "Writing To Get Published"

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