

19th September 2008

Mr. K M Acharya
Secretary
Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE)
Government of India
Shastri Bhavan, Dr. Rajendra Prasad Road
New Delhi 110001

And,

Mr. Naresh Dayal
Secretary
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW)
Government of India
Nirman Bhavan, Maulana Azad Road
New Delhi 110011

Re: Appeal to 'clean up' Drug Dependence Treatment in India

Dear Mr. Acharya and Mr. Dayal,

We write to you as NGOs working with people using drugs to express grave concern at the **deplorable state of drug dependence treatment** in the country. The issue merits urgent attention from your Ministries, both of which manage some aspects of drug dependence.

Violation of rights in the name of "therapy"

Across the country, drug users report neglect and mistreatment in "de-addiction" centres. Physical isolation, chaining, thrashing and violence, forced labour, denial of meals, interception of communication and other inhuman behaviour are commonly practiced in the name of "de-addiction" In recent months, shocking incidents have come to light from Punjab, notably Chandigarh¹, Jalandhar², and Ludhiana.³ ***Patients admitted for "drug treatment" are routinely tortured, and in some cases, beaten to death.*** Most of these centres function without official approval, in contravention of legal provisions for the establishment, and management of drug treatment centres, that is, Sections 71 and 78 of the Narcotics Drugs and Psychotropic Substances Act, 1985. A similar situation was witnessed in the *North East*, where drug users were caged, chained and tonsured to give up drugs. These practices, including the gravest violations of fundamental rights, are seldom reported; even rarely investigated and addressed. India's robust constitutional and legal framework is clearly failing drug users.

Lack of standards for delivery of treatment

While these incidents may be seen as extreme, drug treatment services in India are severely deficient. There are no standards for clinical care; "de-addiction" centres follow ***outmoded, non-scientific methods to make "addicts" "drug free"***. To illustrate, detoxification centres in Manipur administer *Lobain* (a combination of

¹ <http://www.thehindu.com/2008/08/25/stories/2008082555340800.htm>

² <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070512/jal.htm#1>

³ <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2007/20070120/ldh1.htm#1>

dextropropoxyphene with ibuprofen) even though its use has been discontinued in Europe on account of adverse effects. Centres supported by MoSJE merely provide psycho-social interventions such as yoga, spirituality or group counseling. While such activities may aid recovery, they cannot replace pharmacotherapy as the primary method of managing drug dependence. Despite advances in addiction medicine, the Government continues to ignore evidence based *Buprenorphine* and *Methadone* for managing opioid dependence. While countries across the world including China, Malaysia, Vietnam and Thailand are successfully rolling out opioid substitution therapy, drug treatment in India, is sadly, off the mark.

Drug Dependence Treatment – nobody’s responsibility

The abject neglect of drug treatment delivery is not surprising; in most states confusion prevails over whether drug dependence is a subject matter of social welfare or the health department. Worse still, the criminalization of drug consumption, makes it a law enforcement priority. Despite the involvement of many government agencies such as NISD, NCB, MoHFW, ***drug treatment is nobody’s responsibility.*** This is apparent from the absence of data on the extent of drug dependence, which is the very basis for planning, budgeting and implementing treatment programmes. Neither does the Government monitor services, provide follow up and assess relapse. This lack of accountability reflects in the State’s failure to respond to drug users’ health and rights.

Universally, drug dependence has come to be accepted as a **matter of health**, requiring a multi disciplinary approach. The newly developed “*Principles of Drug Dependence Treatment*” by the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime⁴ articulate common, minimum standards for managing drug dependence. The document provides a benchmark for the MoSJE and MoHFW to review their programmes and undertake much needed reforms.

Towards this end, we urge the MoSJE and MoHFW to **convene a joint meeting with NGOs, medical and health providers, drug policy experts and above all, people using drugs** to discuss these concerns. As civil society, we assure you of our support in developing human rights compliant and evidence based interventions for drug dependence.

Yours truly,

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Enclosed: News reports of torture on drug users at “de-addiction” centres in Punjab

⁴ http://www.who.int/substance_abuse/publications/principles_drug_dependence_treatment.pdf