

14053 Hoffman's habit

How to make heroin less deadly

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THE death of the famous actor, Philip Seymour Hoffman from a heroin overdose on February 2nd left the extraordinary actor's fans distraught. Artists have always been prone to self-destruction, and no one knows how to change that. Drug-abuse experts do, however, have a good idea of how to stop more people from destroying themselves by injecting heroin.

Over the past two decades many have come to favour tackling heroin abuse through "harm reduction" policies, rather than tougher policing. Many governments have decriminalised personal use and provided free therapy programmes, using drugs such as methadone that block heroin's high. Two other proven ways to reduce harm, however, are more politically controversial: setting up safe sites where users can inject while monitored by health-care staff, and—for registered addicts who cannot or will not comply with treatment regimes—providing heroin itself free.

Switzerland and the Netherlands pioneered this "Heroin Assisted Treatment" (HAT) approach in the 1990s, and both countries later adopted it as national policy. HAT trials have also been run in Spain, Britain, Germany and Canada. The evidence suggests that HAT slashes heroin-related deaths and HIV infection, since users are shooting up under medical supervision. It also drastically reduces heroin-related crime, since addicts have no need to steal or sell their bodies to get money for their fix. Some studies find that HAT actually works better than methadone. Heroin use is falling steadily in both Switzerland and the Netherlands; by the late 2000s the Dutch incidence of new heroin users had fallen close to zero, and the ageing population of addicts from the 1970s and 1980s continues to shrink.

Decriminalisation of marijuana has also played a role in limiting Dutch heroin use, since it separates the use of cannabis from the use of harder drugs. More interestingly, harm reduction including HAT appears to lead to lower illicit heroin consumption, in part because free government heroin drives out private-sector providers. When addicts shoot up in safe rooms monitored by public-health staff, where they are recruited into treatment programmes or (if they fail or refuse) simply receive free heroin, it gradually erodes the market for dealing the drug.

It might have been hard for someone of Mr Hoffman's fame to use a safe injection site, of course. And whatever governments do, some people will still kill themselves with drugs. But if there are ways to avoid some deaths, why not try them?