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Integration of standard approaches to fight emerging risks for intravenous drug users

An increasing number of drug users in Estonia and Romania are suffering from HIV and hepatitis C. "The need to develop health-promotion strategies to educate drug users in these two countries and curb the spread of disease has become urgent," claimed Arnaud Wasson-Simon, from AIDeS. "Our project title – Integration of Standard Approaches to Fight Emerging Risks for Intravenous Drug Users (INTEGRATION/SAFER IDUS) – summarises what we want to do."

AIDeS is one of the largest European community-based organisations fighting HIV/AIDs. In this project, it has joined forces with two organisations – one in Estonia and one in Romania – that already run harm-reduction services for drug users, as well as with the Finnish AIDS Council, "because Finland has achieved great success with its own health programmes for drug users". The aim is to exchange experiences, improve services for drug users and campaign to make drug harm reduction activities more acceptable to the authorities and the general public.

As a first step, 20 managers of outreach projects in Estonia and Romania will visit Finland and France to see how community-based organisations there inform and support drug users. Theoretical discussions will complement this practical learning. They will look at substitution treatments and explore ethical and legal issues regarding drug harm reduction, including managing relations with the police. One example of this may be police officers waiting near a building housing a drug reduction project to monitor movements and arrest drug addicts.

On their return, the managers will adapt what they have learnt to the reality in their own country. To help achieve this, they will set up a focus group with drug users – one in Romania and one in Estonia – to discuss their needs. In addition, they will evaluate the services they offer drug users.

The project team also plans to involve politicians in the discussions on drug harm reduction. Local government officials – four from each country – will go to France and Finland to talk about this problem with their counterparts, and will visit local NGOs to see how they have reduced drug-related illnesses.

These visits will be part of an information campaign to be organised in Estonia and Romania informing politicians about the successes of harm reduction strategies and allaying misconceptions and fears about drug use and drug users. Each country will set up a national think-tank comprising key actors in the fight against HIV, in human rights activities, and other stakeholders including people living with HIV and drug users. The idea is to build up a consensus about the associated health risks and what can be done to mitigate them.

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