

Harm reduction from drug users to global health

Patrick Aeberhard

doc.aeberhard@gmail.com

Cardiologist, former President of Médecins du Monde Doctors of the world

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ABSTRACT

Background The harm reduction paradigm emerged in the 1990s to address injection drug use and was progressively extended to all drug users. This approach has reshaped public health practice, significantly reducing HIV transmission and, more recently, opioid-related overdoses. **Methods** Through North-South and South-South cooperation, NGOs and patient associations have played a central role in implementing harm reduction strategies. Evidence-based practice and pragmatic policies, including cannabis decriminalization and the introduction of medical cannabis in several countries, have facilitated safer and more controlled use. **Results** The harm reduction model has demonstrated substantial public health benefits, advancing both individual health outcomes and human rights. Its principles are applicable beyond addictions, with potential relevance in fields such as cardiology, oncology, endocrinology, and neurology. Importantly, the paradigm is now increasingly adopted in countries of the Global South, where prevention has often been neglected in favor of costly technological solutions. **Conclusion** At a time when health system sustainability is critical, harm reduction offers a balanced, cost-effective, and rights-based approach. The extension of this paradigm beyond addiction medicine may contribute to more equitable and sustainable health development.