

# Drug addicts should not be arrested and charged - Health ministry

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By RHODA ODHIAMBO @odhiamborhoda



Health CS Sicily Kariuki interacts with reformed drug addicts during the first Eastern Africa Harm Reduction Conference at the Kenya School of Monetary Studies in Nairobi, February 27, 2018. /WILLIAM OKOYO

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The Ministry of Health is opposed to charges against persons arrested for being hooked on illicit drugs such as heroin as they are unwell.

Health Cabinet Secretary Sicily Kariuki noted on Tuesday that it is wrong for law enforcement officers to arrest people on drugs.

“Addiction is not a crime. It is an illness. This means that persons who are arrested while battling substance abuse should not be punished,” she said during the first Eastern Africa Harm Reduction Conference at the Kenya School of Monetary Studies in Nairobi.

Harm reduction refers to policies, programmes and practices that aim to reduce negative effects associated with the use of psychoactive drugs, in people who are unable or unwilling to stop.

Medical Services Director Jackson Kioko said the ministry was aware that persons found abusing drugs are arrested instead of being taken to rehabilitation centres to get help.

“When these persons are arrested, they are charged with being in possession of narcotics. In order to save these people, an assessment needs to be done to establish if they are victims of substance abuse.”

Read: [No drugs no rehab: Agony of addicts in Mombasa prisons](#)

Also read: [Inner demons banished: Reformed women recount drug addiction hell](#)

The three-day conference brought together policy makers, health workers, survivors of drug abuse and human rights advocates who discussed how to control and support those in need of treatment.

Data from the National Aids Control Council shows Kenya has 18,327 people who inject drugs and are HIV positive.

Key Populations Manager at the National Aids/STD Control Programme, Helgar Musyoki, said victims are often stigmatised by the community because of their over-dependence on a substance they are abusing and that their family does not want to associate it.

“These people do not need to be stigmatised. They need help emotionally and psychologically. That is the only way they can overcome their addiction without harm.”

Persons who inject drugs are weaned off the substances through Medically Assisted Therapy (MAT), which involves administering methadone, a narcotic pain reliever, orally, and counseling.

The CS noted the need to reach these populations with comprehensive HIV prevention services, which are critical to achieving the global target of reducing new infections to less than 500,000 globally by 2020.

