



PRESS RELEASE

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Contacts:

Paisan Suwannawong (Thai): +66-81-824-5434

Dr. Thomas Kerr (English): +1-604-314-7817 (Canada) or +66-81-297-3475 (in Thailand, until Sept. 4)

New research points to the need for policy reforms and harm reduction programs for people who inject drugs in Bangkok, Thailand

Bangkok, Thailand (September 1, 2011) –Today, the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group (TTAG), the Urban Health Research Initiative (UHRI) of the British Columbia Centre for Excellence in HIV/AIDS (Vancouver, Canada), and Chulalongkorn University (Bangkok, Thailand) released a report, *“Reducing Drug-Related Harm in Thailand: Evidence and Recommendations from the Mitsampan Community Research Project (MSCRP).”* A collaborative effort between the three entities, the report summarizes two years of research findings on HIV risk behaviors and barriers to accessing HIV and harm reduction services among people who inject drugs (PWID), and provides evidence-based recommendations calling for the expansion of harm reduction programs in Thailand.

“Thailand sorely lacks current, quality data on barriers to accessing HIV care and harm reduction services for injectors, and we wanted to urgently address that need, especially from a policy development perspective. Our research shows clearly the pressing need to expand harm reduction programs in Thailand” said Paisan Suwannawong, the founder of the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group (TTAG), which provides direct services to PWID.

The Mitsampan Community Research Project, currently in its third year of data collection, is a unique, peer-driven public health project that aims to investigate the experiences of PWID in the areas of health care, the criminal justice system, drug use patterns, and HIV risk behavior. Key findings include high rates of syringe sharing due to difficulty with sterile syringe access and high rates of overdose. As well, several studies point to the harms caused by the current emphasis on criminal justice interventions. For example, one study revealed that 48% of local PWID reported having drugs planted on them by police. Further, 78% of participants reported a history of imprisonment, and these individuals were five times more likely to have been in compulsory drug treatment and twice as likely to have shared syringes compared to those not in prison. Recommendations to the Royal Thai Government include urgently developing alternative regulatory frameworks for drug control which give primacy to public health and human rights concerns; providing harm reduction and human rights training for law enforcement officials and prosecutors; and providing a full range of harm reduction services in police detention facilities and prisons.

Dr. Thomas Kerr, an Associate Professor with the University of British Columbia and the principal investigator of the research, commented on the findings from the report. “The evidence from this body of research is clear. High rates of preventable disease continue to occur among people who inject drugs in Thailand. These problems persist due to the fact that harm reduction programs, such as

syringe distribution programs, which are recommended by the World Health Organization and have been proven to be effective, have not been widely implemented in Thailand. This gap, combined with the overreliance on ineffective criminal justice interventions, has meant that Thailand has been left behind in the fight against HIV infection among people who inject drugs. Sadly, this inaction has resulted in immense, preventable human suffering, human rights abuses, and untold costs to the public. Clearly a more effective response is needed.”

Thailand has experienced unrelentingly high HIV and HCV prevalence rates among PWID for more than two decades. Continuous, repressive police crackdowns on people allegedly involved with drugs combined with an overreliance on incarceration and ineffective compulsory drug detention and “treatment” systems for people who use drugs create the conditions for the routine violation of basic human rights of PWID and increased HIV and HCV risk.

Karyn Kaplan, the Policy and Development Director for the Thai AIDS Treatment Action Group, and a co-investigator of this research project, commented on the recommendations contained in this report. “The evidence summarized in our report points the way forward. We have offered recommendations to the Royal Thai Government, the United Nations, and other international donors. Collectively these recommendations call for the immediate implementation of evidence-based harm reduction programs, alternative regulatory legal frameworks which serve to decriminalize people who use illicit drugs, and reforms to police practices. These actions have been implemented in various settings with success. Given the ongoing problems experienced by PWID in Thailand, it is clear that a new direction is needed. Continuing with the status quo will not result in meaningful changes and is simply not acceptable.”

The report launch and panel discussion will be held at 9 a.m. at “Bualuang Innovation” (a room in Technopreneurship and Innovation Management, Chulalongkorn University), 14th floor, Office Tower, Chamchuri Square (Phayathai Road, Pathumwan, Bangkok, 10330). Following the report presentation, a panel of officials from the Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), the Office of the Narcotics Control Board (ONCB), and the United Nations will respond to policy recommendations proposed from the research findings.

The report can be downloaded in both Thai and English at www.ttag.info and <http://uhri.cfenet.ubc.ca/index.php>.