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Sustainable recovery through long-term holistic treatment

Many countries' social policies reflect the belief that drug addiction is a chronic brain disease, a genetically predetermined disorder, and that relapse is inevitable. Believing it is impossible to cure addiction, the general goal has then become the reduction of social harm, through the stabilization of drug addicts rather than full rehabilitation, in the illusion that this also is the more financially convenient option.

What San Patrignano has learned through many years, and what has become the founding principle of our work is that addiction is NOT a "chronic disease" but the symptom of an emotional void, an attempt to escape from oneself and from the world in general, and often begins as a shortcut for those unequipped to face life's sometimes overwhelming challenges and problems. When an individual knocks on our door asking for help, we do not see them as the sum of failures and mistakes but as a unique and special individual full of unexplored potential. This capacity can be simply defined with the word "compassion", but it would be inadequate if not wholly inaccurate.

Coming from this viewpoint, we need to institute a radical change in drug policy. We need to pass from hospitalization, incarceration and endless medication of the drug addict to education, to skills training, to providing a family environment - creating a sort of life-school. We need to transform rehabilitation centers from places where addicts are "treated" to places where individuals can grow and learn how to live.

We need to institute alternative sentencing legislation that makes addicts accountable for crimes they commit, but which gives them a chance for redemption, a chance to become contributing members of society. From hospitals and prisons to life schools.

The situation as it is now: Even when taking into account only the direct costs of drug addiction, such as methadone distribution, needle exchange and those for medical, psychiatric and legal assistance, the expense is enormous. The social costs, as well as the negative impact on individuals, families, children and loved ones is incalculable.

Let's take an average example of a European country spending about 1 billion in one year on substitutive therapy programs. With 1 billion, in one year we could have placed 20,800 people into San Patrignano's program. Four years later, 16,100 if these people would have been fully recovered drug free and living their lives. But as things stand currently, these 20,800 can only be multiplied over and over again into an ever increasing number of individuals subsisting on replacement therapies and revolving clinic and prison doors. A waste of money, of potential and most tragically, of human life. And no end in sight.

Since 1978, when it was founded by Vincenzo Muccioli and a group of volunteers, the San Patrignano community has welcomed and rehabilitated socially marginalized individuals and drug addicts without any social, political, or religious discrimination.

Our long term residential program of drug free recovery has been offered to more than 30,000 people hailing from 50 countries, ranging in age from 13 to over 50, including families with children, aiming at full social reintegration.

The recovery program is not standardized and therefore, contrarily to what happens in many other structures or clinics, the length of stay may vary, with a minimum of at least three years.

The community began simply as a home which opened its doors to young people looking for help and through the years, has assumed the dimensions of a village covering 650 acres, but at its heart it is still the home of an ever growing family.

Beauty is an integral part of the recovery of each person who comes to San Patrignano. No one has a greater necessity to be surrounded by beauty, to experience beauty and to feel like they themselves can create something beautiful than someone who has always been surrounded by the complete opposite: degradation, humiliation, compromise. This is why we do not limit ourselves to creating a beautiful environment, but we also strive to utilize the best structures, the latest equipment and the best teachers and masters in every one of the fields for which we provide professional training.

The educative process places great emphasis on the necessity of learning a profession. Each resident has the chance to chose from over 50 different fields which suit their skills and interests. Ranging from agriculture and animal husbandry to handicrafts, from journalism to information technologies, the options truly run the gamut. This permits a successful reintegration into the workforce and the possibility of financial independence.

The community is currently home to about 1600 people, each of them costing roughly 35 euros a day, or 13,000 euro annually, to maintain, for a total annual expenditure of a 20 million euros. Yet absolutely no money is asked or accepted from any of the residents, their families, and no monetary allocations are provided by the Italian State. The community is able to cover 50% of its costs through the worldwide sale of its quality handcrafted goods and its services which are produced in its professional training workshops. The remaining 50% is garnered through donations of private individuals, corporations, foundations, etc.

Consider that the cost of one completed recovery program can be calculated to just over 40 thousand euros and that three out of four of these completed programs are successful and proven to be relapse free, we can say that for an investment of about 160,000 euro, we are able to help three people fully recover from addiction and be permanently reintegrated into society as drug free, contributing individuals.

So, San Patrignano is independently financed and doesn't cost anything to its residents, their families or the state. But looking at these facts, it is plain that even if it were state funded, considering its success rate it would still be far more financially viable than the current practices in most of the Continent.

Let's take prison into examination: in Western Europe the average daily cost to maintain each prisoner is roughly 150 euros each day. And I believe we can all agree that those who leave prison are usually worse off than when they entered. In the UK alone, according to the Ministry of Justice, the re-offending rate reaches well over 70% in some prisons. Since its founding, San Patrignano has welcomed over 8600 people facing incarceration for crimes tied to their drug addiction, substituting more than 4000 years of jail time. This has meant more than 220 million euros of savings to the Italian tax payers.

"CLICK" Conversely, the 13000 euros spent annually, breaking down to about 35 euro a day) to maintain each person in the community gives the certainty that the majority of those people will, upon leaving, become productive members of the population. About 70% of those who complete the program find work in the field in which they received their training, being addressed to it by the community.

This is the difference between an expense and an investment.

San Patrignano's objective is a complete drug free recovery and the full social reintegration of addicts, regardless of their drug of choice. Several Universities have studied and evaluated our methods and pronounced them highly effective, through sociological research and toxicological exams. In fact, subjects were contacted years after leaving the community and a full 72% of those tested with a hair strand examination after three, four and five years resulted drug free. The worldwide average is about 25%.

At this point You may be thinking, "wonderful, it works. But Is it replicable"? We have collaborated with organizations and individuals in the UK, Canada, Sweden, and Lebanon to start similar projects. It is therefore possible to replicate. It has been done. Certainly it is not as easy as distributing substitutive therapies or psychiatric medications as occurs when too often drugs are regarded as a product and treatment as a sellable commodity where results must be delivered in 28 days. Working in drug treatment is likewise a matter of education: if we are to educate anyone, we have to be prepared to make a strong commitment, keeping it even in the most difficult of times. Because it is through example that we teach. Young people need constancy, honesty, dedication, patience, heart and a 24 hour a day commitment. In the past twenty years this is exactly what we as a society have too often stopped doing, and it is still what policymakers need to be reminded of.