



# Don't end drug treatment that works

BY REBECCA SCHLEIFER AND  
MEGAN MCLEMORE

We met José at Camp Zarzal, a minimum-security prison in Río Grande, Puerto Rico, this past May. At 33, he'd been a chronic drug user for 20 years, spending much of the time cycling in and out of prison, and ultimately losing touch with his family and child. Jose had tried many different treatment programs over the years, but nothing worked. Last November, at Camp Zarzal, he started buprenorphine treatment, daily medication prescribed for opioid dependence. He was amazed at the results.

## Commentary

"This medication really works," he told us. "Almost everything about my life has changed: my personality, communication with my family, the people I hang out with. I see life from a completely different point of view."

Puerto Rico provides Medication Assisted Therapy (MAT) with methadone and, until recently, buprenorphine, to a limited number of heroin-dependent inmates, as part of comprehensive psychosocial support delivered by professional staff. MAT blocks the effects of opioids on the brain, freeing heroin users from cravings and allowing them to func-

tion normally. Thirty years of research has produced what the World Health Organization calls "overwhelming" evidence that MAT is the most effective treatment for opioid addiction. It reduces drug use, criminal activity, risk of HIV and Hepatitis C transmission, and prevents overdose.

Prison authorities had planned to scale up the MAT programs, recognizing that effective drug treatment is critical to the health of Puerto Rico's prisoners, their families and communities. But the newly elected administration has reversed course. Camp Zarzal's buprenorphine program was terminated abruptly in April, although Bayamón Prison's methadone program remains so far. Last week, it was reported that Corrections Secretary Molina Rodríguez claimed the programs did "nothing" and that he planned to focus resources on "faith-based" treatment.

If this is the secretary's position, it contradicts the experience of his own medical staff. It also ignores vast clinical evidence showing that without MAT, most heroin-dependent people relapse, no matter how much psychosocial, religious, or other support they receive.

Prison officials say that 80 percent of inmates are drug dependent, more than half are addicted to heroin. These high rates contribute to

alarming HIV and Hepatitis C rates among Puerto Rican prisoners. Nearly 7 percent of Puerto Rico's inmates are HIV-positive, versus 1.9 percent of prisoners in the U.S. overall. One-third of Puerto Rican prisoners suffer from Hepatitis C; many inmates are HIV/Hepatitis C co-infected.

By providing MAT to prisoners who need it, Puerto Rico is embracing good public health and correctional policy. It is also meeting its human rights obligations. Puerto Rico joins 33 countries — including Canada, Australia and Albania — that provide this treatment to prisoners to satisfy duties set by core human rights treaties to ensure health care in prison is equivalent to that available in the community. The UN Special Rapporteur on Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment recently found that failure to provide methadone and buprenorphine to opioid-dependent prisoners, "may constitute cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment and is therefore prohibited under international human rights law."

At the core of human rights law is concern for human dignity. We saw first-hand how Puerto Rico's MAT programs had restored participants' dignity. One prisoner reported, "I now have personal property, like soap and shampoo. I have put pictures up on the walls

of my cell. Before I had nothing, I was just shooting up and I had nothing ... Now my family comes to visit me, and they even touch me."

Everyone we spoke to at Camp Zarzal — prison staff, inmates, social workers — was devastated by the program's close. One staff member said that the program brought positive changes for individuals and the institution. "There was a big change in the institution itself. ... Now they were respectfully addressing the officers, they had goals, they were planning for the future." Morale plummeted when the buprenorphine program ended. Prisoners "had been through all types of therapy and this was the only thing that had ever worked, and now it was being taken away."

Puerto Rico's medication-assisted therapy programs are recognized models for prison systems in the U.S. and worldwide. We urge the government of Puerto Rico to maintain this leadership, and honor its human rights obligations, by protecting these lifesaving programs.

*Rebecca Schleifer is advocacy director and Megan McLemore is a researcher for the Health and Human Rights division of Human Rights Watch.*

## On pit bulls

Anent your article on page 6 of the June 20, edition of the Daily Sun, please be informed that there is no such dog breed named pit-bull. A pit-bull is a dog bred for fighting and it can be of any breed, such as a Doberman Pinscher, Rottweiler, English Bulldog, Bull Mastiff, etc. They are, however, generally bred as Staffordshire Terriers and the majority of pit-bulls are in fact Staffordshire Terriers.

All of the dogs in the picture on the front page of the aforementioned edition are, indeed, either purebred Staffordshire Terriers or mixes. There is nothing in the breed that is inherently vicious, although Staffords are very sturdy, strong and have enormous pulling power. Stafford Terriers can, of course, be raised as tame and loving pets.

*Sebastián Pérez  
on June 20*

## UPR privatization woes

It's a myth that private enterprise works better than a public institution. Perpetrated by the private enterprisers themselves, who own the commercial media, and we're dumb enough not to notice we're being hoodwinked.

When the University of Puerto Rico student center was operated by university personnel, the food was wholesome, quick and cheap. Now that it's been privatized over to the fast-food joints, the lines are never-ending and service is slow and often unfriendly and the food is mostly greasy junk and expensive.

Also, all over campus there are privatized vending machines that as often as not do not drop you the soda or whatever and keep your money. There's an office at the *Decanato*, where you can ask for your money back, though you lose half an hour to walk there and back, wait your turn, answer the questions and do the paperwork. Notice that you never find a vending machine that malfunctions in your favor, that lets you have the merchandise and your money back too. No, you always lose. You're naive if you say it's not deliberate, that it's not stealing. When there's student unrest the vending machines always get wrecked, which fills my heart with joy.

*Rina Rinaldi  
from San Juan  
on June 15*



## Our lives are too precious for marketplace barter

I agree. Health care should be a public service and not a business. Our lives are too precious to turn into an item of marketplace barter. Particularly when you're not feeling so good and in no condition to haggle. Not that you get a chance to do that in any case. You're told what's what and to take it or leave it because they know you can't leave it. Health providers don't compete, they're a cartel, they've gotten together and agreed on all their pricing and it seems antitrust laws don't apply to them.

*Miguel Estrada  
on June 15 from Caparra*

## Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the United States

Palau is one of the world's smallest countries, totaling 190 square miles of lush tropical landscapes. Its economy depends heavily on tourism and foreign aid, mainly from Washington. Under the Compact of Free Association, U.S. aid to Palau from 1995 to 2009 is expected to exceed \$852 million, according to a report last year by the U.S. Government Accountability Office. It includes direct funding as well as access to U.S. postal, aviation and weather services.

The Republic of Palau is a very small island nation out in the Pacific Ocean near the Philippines.

The new nation comprises eight islands with a total population of about 21,000.

During the recent 14 year span, Palau received \$852 million from Washington, or almost \$61 million per year.

Two additional nation states, the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of the Marshall Islands have also entered into a Compact of Free Association (COFA) with the United States.

Is this what the PDP would have Puerto Rico become?

*Jim McElroy  
from Isla Verde on Jun 16*

## Till hell freezes over

The Popular Democratic Party, like its reactionary GOP counterpart in the States, just can't accept this new world we live in. In an unexpected twist of fate, Hispanics have only to wait thirty to forty years before becoming the largest minority in the U.S. Barack Obama's election to the Presidency presages more changes and greater opportunities for minorities nationally and for Puerto Rico's role within the Union. It is within the context of the latter that leaders of the PPD and PNP should reset their sights.

Puerto Rico's future cannot be left in the hands of a Federal tax-fearing oligarchy or of ideologues inspired by the injustices of the past or by improbable visions of our future. Complicating matters further, I daresay that Democracy has been perverted by our excessive partisan loyalties; hence a man's vote is not necessarily an expression of his own self interest. Who then will speak for the two million Puerto Ricans now living under Federal poverty guidelines? Certainly not those who for over sixty years have been engaging in futile status wars under the pretext that we must first choose our political future in order to have the tools to solve our problems.

The demographic reality in Puerto Rico and the nation should suggest to any levelheaded observer that our future is in the trend. If it's true that we're doing it all for our children (e.g., our future), then it would be wise to view our problems in a historical perspective. Let's give Father Time some space.

In the meantime, how about Muñoz's suggestion that "those who can" should pay Federal Income Tax? He must have felt uncomfortable with his ELA's quasi-beggar status; furthermore, he knew that for every ten cents in taxes we'd probably get a dollar back in the apportionment of Federal funds by Congress.

Of course, if you're reading this and you know it's one hundred thousand dollars, not ten cents, that you'd have to pay — then grab your flag, get help from the Bar Association, let them define culmination of ELA and let them lobby Congress to change the U.S. Constitution to fit their demands.

Waiting for hell to freeze over is hell.

*Ed Martínez  
from San Juan on June 17*

## For better or worse!

Since 1999, Dr. Pedro Rosselló González has not been the Governor of Puerto Rico. Yet a day does not go by that one of the Daily Sun's readers writes something about him. Regardless whether you like him or not, it is clear that the former governor left his mark on our lives for better or worse, something that many of today's politicians will not do.

*Manuel B. Freiría  
from Guaynabo on June 15*