

Hugs for former druggies better than bullet to brain



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It is the only time I have seen a judge hug the accused. It happened last month at the Calgary Drug Treatment Court. Judge Jim Ogle actually came down from the bench, shook the hand of a recovered crystal meth addict named Kieran, and gave him a big hug.

Later, everyone on the drug court — the judge, the accused, the staff and Kieran's fellow recovering addicts — got together for pizza.

Compare this to the plight of Akmal Shaikh, a mentally ill Briton who was executed by the Chinese this week for drug trafficking. In China, people with drug problems get a bullet to the head. In Canada, we give them pizza. I like our approach. In a just and caring society, rehabilitation and a large pepperoni is preferable to China's shameful treatment of Shaikh.

Granted, the two aren't exactly comparable. Kieran was a user. Shaikh was executed for being a trafficker, which is disputed by his daughter. She says her bipolar father was told by drug smugglers in Poland that he could be a pop star in China, even though he couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, judging by a song posted on YouTube that the smugglers

had him record. Shaikh's daughter said the smugglers gave her mentally ill dad a suitcase and sent him off to the People's Republic, where he was arrested, tried without a psychiatric evaluation, and executed.

Despite the differences in the two cases, it is worthwhile noting that if Kieran, whose last name is protected by law, had run afoul of drug laws in China, he would be treated as a criminal and, according to Human Rights Watch, be "subject to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse; forced labour; and inhumane living conditions." It is one of 20 countries where drug users face capital punishment.

Kieran, a good-looking young man with life's potential ahead of him, was instead blessed to live in a country where there are such things as drug treatment courts, where convicted drug users get the chance to rehabilitate themselves instead of languishing behind bars without treatment and likely reoffend when released.

It was notable at Kieran's "graduation" from drug court that Ogle hugged him.

Drug courts were actually once decried as "hugs for thugs" for their perceived soft treatment of drug criminals. Yet such

courts, which also operate in Edmonton, Winnipeg, Regina, Ottawa, Toronto and Vancouver, have proven their worth.

The Calgary drug court, launched in 2007, has a current budget of \$250,000 a year, which provides treatment for up to 16 clients. Defence lawyer Mark Tyndale, the court's board chairman, says an untreated hardcore

addict typically costs the police and justice system about \$20,000 a week. Since its inception, he estimates that Calgary's drug court has saved taxpayers \$12.8 million, or a savings of \$21 for each dollar spent by the court.

Despite this value to taxpayers, to say nothing of the immeasurable benefit to the community in safety and security, Calgary's drug court faces an uncertain future. City funding for the pilot project ran out Dec. 31.

Unlike other Canadian cities, Calgary's drug court was launched too late for federal

money. Ottawa's program for specialized court funding is frozen until 2012. Provincial money for the drug court runs out at the end of this year, pending a review.

With no stable funding, Calgary drug court executive director Linda Edney says she can't expand the program beyond the 16 people she now accommodates. There are an estimated 200 hardcore drug



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addicts in Calgary. The courts says it needs about \$575,000 annually to function effectively.

The drug court is not a get-out-of-jail free card. It takes about 18 months to complete the program, which involves mandatory drug testing, weekly appearances before Judge Ogle and intensive rehabilitation and counselling.

On the day Kieran graduated — Judge Ogle reduced his sentence to one day's probation for successfully completing the program — updates provided by the staff on other drug court participants were encouraging. One woman had been accepted into a University of Calgary program. Another was donating money to buy a goat for an African family. One man was reconnecting with his mother, who had disowned him.

Kieran was accepted at an art school. Other participants have gone on to Bow Valley College. One is working at a law firm.

Not all succeed. Tyndale says three clients have been removed from the program since its inception for reoffending.

But the success of the program far outweighs its failures, and Calgary will be worse off without it.

The drug court needs stable funding.

In a just society, when people need and want help, I vote for hugs and pizza.

It beats locking people up and throwing away the key, or a bullet to the brain.

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