

In 'Sober Houses,' Heroin Addicts Learn to Help Themselves



Hilary Heuler
A former addict straightens a flag outside a sober house in Zanzibar

This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

Tourists come to Zanzibar for its white sand beaches and historic buildings in Stone Town. But something else also makes its way to the Tanzanian island: heroin trafficked across the Indian Ocean from Asia.

Most of the heroin shipped through East Africa is headed for Europe and North America. But Rey Chad Abdool of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime says a lot of it stays on the continent.

REYCHAD ABDOOL: "We know for a fact that heroin is being used in at least thirty countries in Africa. And we also know for a fact that the number of countries reporting injecting drug use, especially of heroin, is also increasing in Africa."

The problem in Zanzibar has led to some creative local solutions.

Suleiman Mauly stopped using heroin six years ago. Now he operates a network of so-called sober houses. These are run by addicts themselves to help one another recover. There are nine sober houses -- eight for men and one for women.

Mr. Mauly himself went through a drug treatment program in Kenya. But it cost around two thousand dollars, he says, and "not many people can afford that in Zanzibar."

Staying in a sober house costs about one hundred dollars a month. Most of the people are supported by their families.

Treatment is based on the idea that drug addiction is more of a public health problem than a crime. Mr. Mauly says this is still a new idea to many people.

SULEIMAN MAULY: " Because addiction, it's a disease, and addicts need treatment. But people, they hear that addicts are bad people and they need punishment."

He says in the sober houses, the addicts are in charge of nearly everything.

SULEIMAN MAULY: "The sober house method, it's a new method to Zanzibar. It's a new phenomenon to East Africa, whereby drug addicts take responsibility to run the system. Recovering addicts are in charge, from the guard, kitchen, running sessions, everything."

This responsibility, he says, is important to building their belief in their own abilities. The men also learn woodworking as a way to earn money.

Much of the program is based on the twelve-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous. But it also includes art therapy, yoga and even acupuncture. This is done by Kassim Nyuni, a sober house counselor and former addict himself. He was trained by a volunteer from a Chinese medical school in Hawaii.

KASSIM NYUNI: "It reduces tension, and it's relaxing. It's a kind of treatment that's very effective for the recovering addicts."

Still, Mr. Nyuni estimates that around sixty percent of the recovering addicts in the program return to heroin.

Suleiman Mauly hopes to expand the network in Zanzibar. His next goal, he says, is to send former addicts to work with heroin users in prisons.

Edwin has been in the program for five months. He says that without the will to change, the sober house method cannot possibly help.

And that's the VOA Special English Health Report. I'm Steve Ember.

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