

RAGS TO RICHES

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The opioid substitution therapy (OST) programme was a turning point in my life. It gave me a chance to beat the lazy drug user in me and start a new life. What happened was something that could only be described as “from rags to riches”.

I started with harmless weed, then unwittingly moved on to opiates and then to synthetic drugs with opiates. Like all people who use drugs, I had to live a double life in order to make money. To hide my drug use, I had to lie and twist things around. I thought I was the smartest and convinced myself that I was not like the others and that I could quit when I wanted to, and the addiction would not take over me.

Over time, drugs have effectively created a kind of megalomania in my subconscious. My social behaviour became obsessively accusatory, loudly shouting and eventually resentful of the whole world. It was only natural that in the end, this “nice guy” who promises but does not do anything, who does not pay his debts because

only cowards pay them, you see :), was eventually dumped by normal people who were pretty convinced that I was a NO GO!!! This kind of psychological warfare with everyone who did not support my “poisoning” goals got me into a “slammer” – more than once and more than twice. No matter how much money you get for the buzzing suicide, it still ends on a DOWNBEAT. The same old tale, the same old jail :).

It was only when my lost day-to-day war for nickels, my “junkie” mindset, which had killed everything human in me, EXCEPT FOR THE APPETITE :), and my withdrawal brought me into the OST programme that I found myself very surprised. I was stunned at the inner physical and especially mental peace that the OST medication gave me. Gradually, with the calm in my body and especially in my mind, I saw how my destructive thinking and behaviour shifted to a constructive one as a result of not having to be nervous and think only about how to get rid of withdrawal syndrome anymore.

The cumulative effect of the medicine in the body makes it possible to avoid withdrawal symptoms for 24 hours. I immediately got a job at a construction site, and over time, I began to feel high from the results of my effort at work and at home. The wages allowed me to take care of myself, renovate my flat and make more and more friends in the business world. When I got a job as a marker in a billiard hall and bought my own billiard table, I agreed to put it in a cafe on the terms of a mutually beneficial partnership with the owner of that cafe. Feeling the joy and real value of co-operation, I began to appreciate and nurture good relationships



with people. I have come to realise that it is good relationships with people that make it possible to succeed in business.

The substitution therapy gave me a chance to work peacefully; my eyes opened, and I saw a completely different world. It is a world of love and well-being, mutual help, and happy living. A world that is out of reach for “addicts” with a consumerist mindset. I can now say with certainty that these worlds do not overlap and are not compatible with each other. Never will people who live and help each other to earn money want to help someone who spends everything on self-destruction to make any money.

So, it was through the OST programme that I was able to completely change my consumerist mindset to one of mutual help and the destructive behaviour of an “addict” to the constructive behaviour of a responsible businessman. It was OST that helped me to change myself and, more importantly, to change the society’s attitude towards me. I made real friends and developed business partnerships. But the most amazing thing is that the bravest woman in the world – my beloved wife – believed in me and my sincere change and married me. She is a lecturer at a prestigious university and 13 years younger than me. Nevertheless, she fell in love with me, believed in me and gave birth to my beautiful daughter. That was the ultimate human happiness that I felt after transitioning into a different world just because of the OST programme. All this gave us motivation, and my wife and I set up the Schastia Poruch Charity Foundation to help key groups in resocialisation and integration into society.

Fortunately, the global community, represented by the Global Fund (GF), which supported the OST programme in Ukraine for many years, demonstrated the incredible benefits

of the programme in integrating people with substance dependence into society. When moving to other countries, the GF persuaded the Ukrainian political establishment to legislate the state funding of the OST programme in our country. Kudos to the Global Fund for their noble mission!!! However, the Ukrainian authorities, both police and medical, are in no hurry to acknowledge and accept the harm of punitive drug policies.

This is particularly about the attitude towards people who use drugs. One of the conflicts I had with my OST doctor was when I left the programme for a month with a 75 mg dose of methadone. When I came back, they stubbornly refused to prescribe me 75 mg. I had to contact the National Drug Dependence and OST Helpline. With their assistance, I managed to avoid any discomfort and



claim my rights as a patient. Only by persistently claiming one’s rights through written appeals to authorities can something be gained from the site staff.

Just yesterday, in the pouring rain, I walked up to the site and saw 15 people getting wet outside and not even allowed into the corridor of the unit. Although there are chairs provided in the corridor for those waiting, under the guise of the pandemic, the site staff are keeping everyone outside in the rain. Savage indifference and lack of support.

However, when the pandemic first started, from five to seven patients were let into this corridor, and this did not violate any epidemiological norms. Again, I had to call the hotline operated by the Global Fund, explain the situation and force the site staff to open the doors to let the soaked patients in. I am sure that over time, this aggressive human factor in the care of OST patients will go looking for a job in the market, and patients will have better relationships with the staff. But that’s only possible if we

don't keep silent and start advocating for our legitimate rights and interests ourselves.

In addition to the above, I would like to tell you about several days that I spent as an OST patient dealing with the consequences of the aggressive drug policy.

So, when my wife and I bought a car, I had the imprudence of driving it to get my OST. The site workers saw me driving our Honda, and on the same day, the police stopped me twice on the road and took me for a test. The first examination showed that I was clean, although I had taken my daily 75 mg of methadone. Meanwhile, excited as a "puppy" that the medical examination showed no methadone from the programme, I continued to drive. However, as it turned out later, the patrol policemen put me on their database as an OST patient and over the next week, they stopped me and took me for a test three more times.

Ten days later, I received four conclusions of the medical examination, which indicated that only methadone from the programme was found in my tests. The most unfair thing about this was that all the conclusions emphasised a state of drug intoxication. Naturally, I started asking fair questions about how it could be possible for the site to give me my medication with one hand and then with the other hand write that the medication was intoxicating me. Finally, I got the answer that since the police had found out that I was on the OST programme, I was not allowed to drive a car, even though I was a stable patient.

Thanks to my lawyer, I won every court case against me, but I am still unable to drive because all my reports are registered in the police ARMOR (Automated Workplace of Operative Officer) database, and no police officer will allow me to drive a car for that reason. The fact that I won all the lawsuits against the police and retained my rights has driven the police into complete legislative madness.

I decided to change my surname to avoid being hunted by patrol officers. However, in addition to the fact that only police officers have the

right to use the ARMOR database and my data are stored there illegally, the police forbade the registry office to change my surname given that the ARMOR database has a record of protocols under Article 130 of the Code of Administrative Offences of Ukraine.

Of course, I filed a lawsuit demanding to be allowed to change my surname, as a state body does not have the right to dismiss a person's petition to change their surname because of administrative protocols. Unfortunately, punitive drug policy is applied everywhere in Ukraine. Even though non-governmental organisations (NGOs) regularly organise awareness training sessions on the legality of OST for the police, police raids targeting patients near OST sites occur with disturbing regularity in various cities.

In addition to making drug policy in our country truly humane, I would really like to see international donor organisations, whose priority is to help key groups in Ukraine and support more projects in different cities to create community resocialisation centres for ex-convicts, people who use drugs and people living with HIV. This is needed so that our folks don't go back to street drugs and crime after they are released from prison. It is important for them to have their own safe place where they have legal support, medical and employment opportunities, computer training and sports, as well as many other things they need to lead a fulfilling life. In such centres, these folks would be able to see by positive examples all the advantages of the OST programme over street drugs, and their lives would change for the better.

In the end, I would like to thank all those involved in the promotion of lifesaving OST programmes around the world in general and Ukraine in particular.

Victor Dotsenko, Ukraine

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