

# Cash 'bribes' to stop junkies having babies causes ethics storm

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FEMALE drug addicts in Wales could soon be offered money to use contraceptive implants to stop them falling pregnant, Wales on Sunday can reveal.

A Newport-based charity wants to offer a £50 “incentive” for junkies to use long-term reversible contraception at times when their lifestyles are deemed so chaotic they should not have children.

Last night, the idea triggered an ethical storm with critics saying the money would amount to bribery and that addicts’ human rights would be infringed.

The proposal comes just months after US campaigners, who pay to sterilise substance abusers, set up base in the UK.

In October, Project Prevention offered £200 to male drug-users in London, Glasgow, Bristol, Leicester and parts of Wales to have a vasectomy.

Martin Blakebrough, chief executive of the drug and alcohol charity Kaleidoscope, said his plan did not go as far as that but would still stop babies being physically and mentally damaged by drugs during , and would reduce several long-term costs to society.

According to a report written for the charity by Dr Bernadette Hard, a GP with special interest in substance misuse, more than 17,500 Welsh children are thought to be adversely affected by parental alcohol problems while around one third of all childcare social work cases involve parental substance misuse at a cost of around £117m a year.

Mr Blakebrough said his proposed scheme could lower the number of children in care – leading to substantial savings in public money – while it would also stop children being born into the turbulent lives of addicts.

“We are not here to judge people, all we are saying is that some people need a bit of a push to benefit themselves and society,” he said

“What we would never say to any woman is that they would never be to have children. But with certain groups of addicts a lot of them are not in the position to have a planned pregnancy their lives are just too chaotic – the idea is simply to delay the process.”

He said the plan, which would firstly take the form of a pilot of around 100 women once funding had been achieved, would see the NHS foot the bill for supplying the contraception while Kaleidoscope would offer its service users a £50 incentive in the form of vouchers.

But William Graham, AM for South Wales East, said the idea was ethically challenging and “smacked of the nanny state”.

“It essentially amounts to bribery and I’m not sure many people would be willing to accept that,” he said.

“And offering financial incentives is risking providing funds for these people to support their habits.

“It smacks a lot of the nanny state – what we are saying to these adults is that we can’t trust them

with £50 cash but a voucher is OK.”

The Tory AM said he understood the reasons behind the proposal but added he could not see it working without extremely strict regulation.

He added: “You would have to be absolutely certain that people taking these measures are properly counselled and are fully aware of what they are agreeing to go ahead with.”

Monsignor Canon Bob Reardon, a senior member of the Catholic Church in Wales, said not only did the Church oppose the plan because it went against its moral teachings but he believed it also infringed on the human rights of addicts.

He said the idea conflicted with Church’s view that all methods of artificial contraception are morally wrong and that the proposed scheme “infringes on the freedoms of the individual”.

In Dr Hard’s study, analysis revealed 75% of children born to addicts end up in the care of someone other than themselves – a figure that Mr Blakebrough claims the Kaleidoscope scheme could address.

“The issue is whether it’s right for the child and right for the mother,” he said.

“If we can help addicts overcome their addictions by providing the best support then what’s to say they can’t become a good parent in the future.

“But if they have a child while addicted the chances are that child will end up in care and then the guilt they feel is tremendous and it’s very difficult for them to recover from that. It’s also difficult for the children to get back from that start in life.”

He said Kaleidoscope intended to “sound out” reaction to the scheme before contacting the Assembly Government as well as private companies for funding for the strategy which, he says, is essentially already in place.

“What we need from the politicians is for them to express the view that this, in principle, is a good idea. Then we get round the table and discuss the way forward.

“We are flexible, we’re looking at this because it’s a problem which hasn’t been resolved and the current system isn’t working and all we’re saying is that we need to look at alternatives.

“If someone else wants to show us another system then we’re happy to look but we need to think radically.”

Although not responsible for coming up with the proposed scheme, Dr Hard said she was still very much behind it having seen first-hand the problems that pregnancy can cause drug users and society.

“Never would I say that anyone who wanted children is not fit to do so but the fact is some people are not always fit right now. For me it’s a bit of a no brainer to encourage and incentivise long-acting reversible contraceptive methods,” she said.

“The problem with offering people sterilisation as a resolution is for me very ethically challenging.

“If you know that person is an addict then they are chemically imbalanced and the decision making is not always great. To offer them £200 when they are desperate for money and not in a frame of mind where they can make decisions is very ethically challenging.

“And the thing is everyone is different. Some have it in them to really change their lives around and it would be a great shame if the chance to have children was taken away from them.

“It’s about taking responsibility, a lot of drug users have gone through the process of having their children go through social services and it’s horrible for them. It’s not a good start for the children and it’s not a good start for the parent and it’s a position we should try to avoid.”

While the Catholic Church opposed the plans, the Church in Wales’ Bishop of Monmouth, the Right Reverend Dominic Walker, said it could prove beneficial.

“Kaleidoscope is a very well-respected charity which was actually started by a Christian minister and was once based in a church in Newport. The proposed scheme recognises the drug problem we have in society today and it’s a way of helping women and children and rescue them from the habit and addiction.

“This scheme has to be safe and voluntary for the women and used in conjunction with other ways of helping them recover from addiction.”

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