Law Enforcement and Drug Treatment: A Culture Clash

A raid on an opiate-substitution treatment center in Ukraine highlights tense relationship between police, IDUs, and harm-reduction advocates

ODESSA, UKRAINE—On 11 March, Tatyana Afanasiadi went to the Odessa Oblast Narcological Dispensary for her dose of buprenorphine, an opiate-substitution drug distributed there each day along with methadone. Afanasiadi, 31, is not just one of the clinic’s more than 200 drug-dependent clients, about half of whom are infected with HIV. She is a lawyer and head of the Union Together for Life, a nongovernmental organization that catalyzed the opening of this pioneering opiate-substitution treatment (OST) program, and she helps run the office. This role thrust her into the middle of a high-profile showdown with police that loudly broadcast the sharp tension throughout Eastern Europe between law enforcement and harm-reduction efforts like OST that are designed to slow HIV’s spread.

According to Afanasiadi, as she was leaving the clinic that Thursday morning, three men dressed in civilian clothes approached, greeted her by name, slapped handcuffs on her wrists, and took her to an unmarked car with tinted windows. “At first I thought it was a scheme where police grab drug users and then ask them to identify another user they’re already looking for,” she says. Afanasiadi then worried that they were going to plant drugs on her and demand a bribe, so she stressed that she didn’t have any money. When that had no impact, she tried another tack. “I told them I’m ill and tried to frighten them with my HIV infection, but they were knowledgeable, and it didn’t work.”

The men, who she says refused to show identification, took Afanasiadi to their police station. Unbeknownst to her, the clinic was being raided because of allegations that it did not have the authority to distribute substitute opiates and suspicions that staff members, including Afanasiadi, were selling the drugs on the side. At the station, with two female observers present, Afanasiadi had to remove her clothes, which were carefully inspected for stashed drugs. “They were extremely dis-