

The Herald

McConnell calls for new therapy treatment to help heroin users

Jack McConnell has called for a radical shake-up in Scotland's drug rehabilitation policy after witnessing a controversial new heroin addiction treatment in action.

The First Minister said that Scotland must seek to abandon the methadone programme and look instead for new, drug-free methods of kicking heroin.

His comments came after he visited a trial of neuro-electric therapy (Net), a drug-free addiction treatment, invented by a Scottish neurosurgeon, Dr Meg Patterson.

At the trial, Mr McConnell met six female heroin users who are undergoing a seven-day course of Net. The treatment involves a weak electric current being applied to the brain.

Laura, 28, a mother of two, has been a heroin user for seven years, but has failed to quit using methadone. She told the First Minister she had been "amazed" by how quickly her cravings for heroin had disappeared while undergoing Net.

Afterwards the First Minister spoke of his desire to see Net given a full clinical trial, with a view to making it available on the NHS.

He said: "We're at the stage in Scotland where we need to have open minds and be willing to try new things.

"We need to change direction - away from harm reduction towards drug free policy.

"There's no doubt that Net has had an impact on the vast majority of people who have tried it.

"I'm very keen that we find a way of progressing to a proper research proposal so that Net can be tested in the conditions that will meet the standards of the National Health Service.

"If this is successful, then this treatment could operate on a scale that can make a huge difference to people's lives."

Following Mr McConnell's glowing report, the Chief Medical Officer, Harry Burns, will visit the trial this week to meet the recovering addicts and make his own judgment.

The next step could be a larger trial involving addicts in prison. Dan Gunn, the governor of Saughton prison, Edinburgh, will visit the trial this week, to hear a proposal from the creators of Net.

There has also been interest from Andrew McLellan, HM Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, who paid a visit to an earlier trial of Net, where he met former prisoners who had kicked heroin using Net.

John Mullen, of the Third Step, said: "The prisons would be a good place to test Net. We hope that Mr McLellan's interest could lead on to greater things."

The treatment also has won praise from Annabel Goldie, leader of the Scottish Conservatives, who has seen Net in action this week.

She said: "Neuro-electric therapy may very well offer the key to introducing a range of options for people seeking help with drug addiction.

"I shall certainly await with interest the assessment of the trial and the conclusions drawn from it."