



---

<sup>b</sup>  
**UNIVERSITÄT  
BERN**

IRM, Forensisch-Psychiatrischer Dienst, Falkenplatz 18, 3012 Bern

Medizinische Fakultät

**Institut für Rechtsmedizin**

Forensisch-Psychiatrischer Dienst (FPD)

*Gesamtleitung:*

Prof. Dr. med. Michael Liebreuz

**Forschungsgruppe**

Bern, 9. Juli 2018

## **Opioid maintenance therapy (OMT) in Belarus and Switzerland – a multistep project to enhance methodological knowledge and strengthen competencies in the further education of young scientists and physicians in the area of OMT**

Michael Liebreuz<sup>1</sup>, Roman Schleifer<sup>1</sup>, Andrei Kapytau<sup>2</sup>, Uladzimir Pikirenia<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Forensic Psychiatry, Institute of Forensic Medicine, University of Bern, Switzerland (PI)

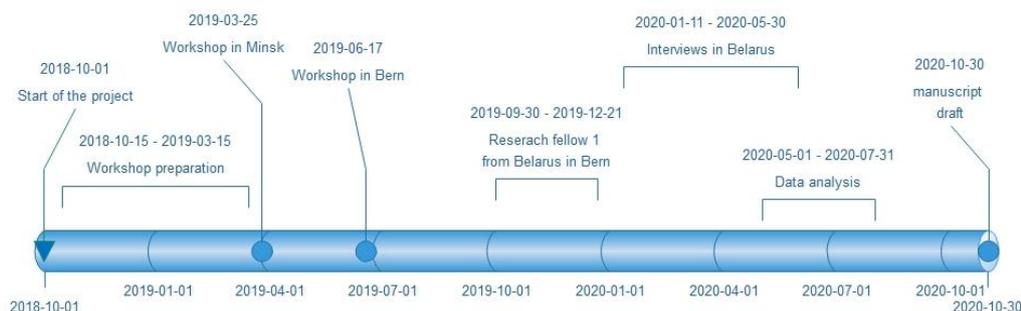
<sup>2</sup>Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology, Belarus State Medical University, Minsk, Belarus (Co-Pi)

In the 1980s the consumption of illegal psychotropic substances, especially heroin, increased massively in Switzerland. The intervention methods, which were considered revolutionary at the time, included a harm reduction approach with the introduction of low threshold opioid maintenance programs (OMT) even in special settings like prisons. In addition to methadone and buprenorphine, heroin assisted treatment (HAT) was introduced for severely addicted patients who continued to use "street heroin". That Swiss drug policy – based on a four-pillar drug approach – is considered a success. The main elements of this success are a c. 50% reduction in overdose deaths since 1991, a c. 80% reduction in incipient heroin use, a c. 65% reduction in HIV infections, plus a reduction of drug-related delinquency in cities and in nuisance from open drug scenes. Belarus has recently made methadone substitution treatment for opioid-dependent people possible under very different economic and legal conditions compared to those in Switzerland. In this endeavor Belarus was supported by several NGOs. Today the treatment costs for patients are covered by an initiative of the Global Fund, which is set to expire. According to data from the Ministry of Health, 66,500 people were listed in an official state register as addicted to illegal psychotropic substances at the end of 2016. The number of opiate addicts is estimated to be around 18,500, about 1/3 of whom are women. Since the regular introduction of OMT in 2009 a significant amount of clinical-practical competence has developed in Belarus. The aim of this project is to extend these practical competences by adding scientific methodological knowledge and by strengthening competencies in the field of further education of young scientists and physicians in the area of OMT. Switzerland and the University of Berne can contribute here, particularly in view of their decades of experience in these areas. A multi-step approach is planned to achieve these aims: 1. To hold one seminar each in Belarus and Switzerland in order to gain an initial insight into the institutions, and to familiarize participants with concrete practical-clinical as well as educational procedures and to discover any political and legal boundaries. 2. To implement an annually recurring exchange between young researchers in the form of a visiting research fellowship in order to strengthen scientific cooperation. 3. To develop a continuing education curriculum that meets the needs of patients and health professionals in Belarus in the area of OMT. To this end, a mixed methods study

is to be conducted in Belarus over the next two years, which will identify perceptions, expectations, possibilities and limits of OMT in Belarus. The results of this study will be published in an international journal, e.g. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *Plos One* or *Harm Reduction Journal*. Within the framework of the proposed project, not only can the University of Bern and the Belarus State Medical University benefit generally from deepened scientific cooperation, but even more the heavily burdened and stigmatized group of opioid-dependent patients.

### Time Line 133 Wörter

The Swiss Team plans to travel to Belarus between March 25<sup>th</sup> and March 28<sup>th</sup> 2019, while the Belarus Team intends to travel to Switzerland between June 17<sup>th</sup> and June 20<sup>th</sup> 2019 (step I). A visiting research fellow will be invited to Switzerland during the fall/winter semester of 2019/20 to familiarize him/herself with mixed-methods methodology procedure and to develop a topic guide (step II). After his/her return to Belarus, he/she will start to interview health staff und patients until Spring 2020. Analysis of data will be carried by July 2020. A first version of the manuscript will be drafted by September 2020 and no later than October 2020. A further research fellow will start to work on the grant proposal (based on the findings of step 2) to lay the foundation for step 3.



### 1. **Build on mutual areas of excellence in both countries and in the institutions involved** 212 Wörter

Both institutions have broad practical clinical knowledge in the fields of substitution treatment, a harm reduction approach and the therapy of dual diagnoses. Both partners also have experience in providing basic psychiatric care for particularly vulnerable groups such as prisoners, traumatized women, migrants. Further, they both have national and international networks in the field of harm reduction (Swiss Society of Addiction Medicine, Swiss Research Institute for Public Health and Addiction and Group Pompidou of the Council of Europe, etc.). Both partners are involved in a variety of activities, e.g. through lectures, seminars and internships in the field of promoting young medical talent, whether they are medical students or doctors in continuing education. In the scientific field, both partners have conducted studies and published them in international journals. For example, the Swiss group has worked on the effectiveness of opioid maintenance treatment and heroin-assisted treatment in a Swiss penitentiary, has published on sociodemographic information, aversive and traumatic events, offense-related characteristics, and the mental health of delinquent women in forensic-psychiatric care in Switzerland and investigated attitudes towards a maintenance (-agonist) treatment approach in high-dose benzodiazepine-dependent patients. The Belarus group has inter alia worked on the influ-

ence of methadone treatment on patients' relations with their dependents and investigated factors predicting the success of OMT treatment.

**2. *Establish a foundation for collaboration beyond the funded term, with potential to receive external support* 173 Wörter**

Both institutions aim to establish a long-term collaboration between the University of Berne and the University of Belarus, which is why the proposed project is designed as a multistep undertaking. Beginning with step 2, it will be possible to apply for additional external funding, beyond the funding of the Swiss State Secretariat for Education, Research and Innovation. For this step, we will target funding under the "Mobility" or "Scientific Exchange" funds of the Swiss National Science Foundation. The PI has relevant previous experience with the latter funding organization. Support from the Federal Commission for Scholarships for Foreign Students (FCS) or from the Swiss Government Excellence Scholarships is also conceivable. For step 3 of the collaboration, support will be sought from the Council of Europe under the action plan for Belarus 2016-2018 (and associated frameworks). Industrial grants are also conceivable: Indivior PLC (the manufacturer of buprenorphine) has obtained a license to distribute Subutex® from the spring of 2018 and awards unrestricted educational grants. Additionally, Belarus is seeking continuous financial support from the Global Fund.

**3. *Emphasize mobility and contacts between young talents in Switzerland and the partner country and contribute to building and reinforcing networks in science & technology between Switzerland and the target region.* 172 Wörter**

The PI is currently an assistant professor of forensic psychiatry and head of the department of forensic psychiatry at the University of Bern. One objective of this institution is to strengthen international collaboration in a medical field in which there is a high rate of substance abuse. Thus the intended collaboration is very beneficial for the PI. The Co-PI and its Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology is the leading institution in this field in Belarus. Dr. Uladzimir Pikirenia works closely with the local methadone clinic and thus offers unique access to medical health staff and patients suffering from opioid dependence. Dr. Pikirenia is involved in research as well as providing medical training. Thus, both partners aim to implement an annually recurring exchange between young researchers in the form of a visiting research fellowship in order to strengthen scientific cooperation as outlined under step 2. All involved visiting research fellows from Switzerland and from Belarus will directly benefit from the research results (see section one) and participate in all resulting publications.

**4. *Benefit of joint funding from the participating institution or other sources in the partner country (may also be in-kind contributions):* 116 Wörter**

The Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology of the Belarus State Medical University is willing to support this collaboration by providing in-kind contributions, such as providing room and space, office administration, website and systems support and volunteer work. The Co-PI strongly believes that the proposed project with its multistep approach will prove to be beneficial for the Belarus State Medical University's Department of Psychiatry and Medical Psychology and for the University of Bern's department of Forensic Psychiatry as well as for non-governmental organizations on both sides in the field of addiction medicine and especially opioid maintenance treatment. To underline the seriousness of this assessment, the Co-PI has issued a letter of intent attached to this application.