



Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) Inc.

committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use

April Newsletter 2016

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Hi Everyone,



OK - so not very original I know - but in the context of the Drug Law Wars perhaps appropriate?

We need ideas! We need people who can read, write and talk (which I hope is everyone!). The effectiveness of FFDLR relies upon its members. We need members to *read*, in order to stay in touch with world wide and local movements which share our vision of a humane and effective drug law strategy. We need members to *write* well thought out

submissions. Such submissions have built up our organisation's credibility over the last 20 years. We need members to *talk* eloquently with the public and policy makers in order to achieve the change we wish to see. Finally we need *ideas* as input into FFDLR reform strategy.

If you have the time for reading, writing, and talking – or you have ideas you want to see implemented – either give me a ring (6259 9899), email, or come along to our next meeting – we would love to see you!

- **Monthly meeting at 7:30 at St Ninian's Uniting Church in Lynham on the 28th of April at 7:30 pm.**

I'll give you some examples of reading, writing and talking in the body of this newsletter, but ahead of that, a big thank you to all the membership donations that have been coming in. Our treasurer Bob has been working overtime. We also need to keep the data base up to date so please let us know of any changes of address – phone number and so on.

Reading

Thanks to the indefatigable Marion I was sent an email link to the opening address of UNGASS 2016 – the UN drug summit that has just concluded. It was delivered by Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General of the World Health Organisation. Some of the text is presented below:

Excellencies, distinguished delegates, ladies and gentlemen,

The world drug problem is a prime concern for the World Health Organisation, the lead UN agency

for health. I have to thank you for according high attention to public health in the outcome document.

The health and social harm caused by the illicit use of psychoactive drugs is enormous. This harm includes direct damage to the physical and mental health of users, drastically reducing the length and quality of their lives.

Drug use harms families and communities, also through crimes against property and people. It contributes to traffic and domestic injuries, child abuse, and gender-based sexual violence and other forms of violence.

Worldwide, an estimated 27 million people have drug use disorders. More than 400,000 of these people die each year.

Injection drug use accounts for an estimated 30% of new HIV infections outside sub-Saharan Africa. Injection drug use contributes significantly to epidemics of hepatitis B and C in all regions of the world. Around 10 million people who inject drugs are infected with hepatitis C. And it is very expensive to treat hepatitis C; even the richest countries in the world cannot afford it.

In the view of WHO, drug policies that focus almost exclusively on use of the criminal justice system need to be broadened by embracing a public health approach. A public health approach starts with the science and the evidence. It tells us several things.

Whilst writing about UNGASS it is heartening to see that we have an ally in the iconic Richard Branson – and a 1000 of signatories to the following letter. (see <http://www.drugpolicy.org/ungass2016/full>)

April 14, 2016

Mr. Ban Ki-moon

Secretary General

United Nations

Dear Secretary General,

With the United Nations General Assembly Special Session on the World Drug Problem (UNGASS) fast approaching in New York, we seek your enlightened leadership in calling for reform of global drug control policies.

The drug control regime that emerged during the last century has proven disastrous for global health,

security and human rights. Focused overwhelmingly on criminalisation and punishment, it created a vast illicit market that has enriched criminal organisations, corrupted governments, triggered explosive violence, distorted economic markets and undermined basic moral values.

Governments devoted disproportionate resources to repression at the expense of efforts to better the human condition. Tens of millions of people, mostly poor and racial and ethnic minorities, were incarcerated, mostly for low-level and non-violent drug law violations, with little if any benefit to public security. Problematic drug use and HIV/AIDS, hepatitis and other infectious diseases spread rapidly as prohibitionist laws, agencies and attitudes impeded harm reduction and other effective health policies.

Humankind cannot afford a 21st century drug policy as ineffective and counter-productive as the last century's. A new global response to drugs is needed, grounded in science, compassion, health and human rights.

The role of criminalisation and criminal justice must be limited to the extent truly required to protect health and safety. Leadership must come from those who recognise that psychoactive drug use is first and foremost a matter of health. Drug control efforts must never do more harm than good, or cause more harm than drug misuse itself.

We are heartened by positive developments around the world since the United Nations last convened a special session in 1998. Evidence-based harm reduction programs to contain the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, treat addiction and reduce drug-related criminality are now under way in almost one hundred countries.

A growing number of city, state and national governments no longer treat drug use and possession as crimes. Some are beginning to legally regulate cannabis for medical and even non-medical purposes. Many more recognise the need to make essential medicines readily available, especially for pain and palliative care in lower income countries. But far greater and more systemic reforms are essential.

We were encouraged last year, Mr. Secretary General, when you urged governments to use the UNGASS opportunity “to conduct a wide-ranging

and open debate that considers all options.” This, by and large, has not happened – at least within the confines of the United Nations. Your leadership is now required to ensure that the seeds of reform are nourished, not discarded, and that the stage is set for real reform of global drug control policy.

We added our list of signatures to a letter to the UN from David Borden, Executive Director, **StoptheDrugWar.org**, which included this clause:

Governments should repeal laws that criminalise personal use and possession per se of drugs, taking into account their legal obligations under international human rights standards.

For full documentation see <http://stopthedrugwar.org/global>.

Dave Borden also organised the letter to President Obama which also had our name on, along with approximately 300 other organisations world wide.

Despite the promising start, and anti-prohibitionist lobbying, an agreement that was actually established ahead of the meeting was agreed to on the first day of the conference according to the Guardian <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/21/un-special-session-global-drug-policy-failure-critics-say>

Essentially it appears that the UN is maintaining its position encapsulated in the “War on Drugs” phrase.

Some comments at the end of the Guardian Article highlight the frustrations of the progressive countries.

“We are not expecting a lot from UNgass,” said former president of Switzerland Ruth Dreifuss. “In this sense, our provision is what the reality is: that the world community is not ready, is not willing, to have the change of politic that is absolutely necessary.”

Former Colombian president César Gaviria Trujillo told the small crowd at the Grand Hyatt in New York City that the UN’s aim of a “[society free of drug abuse](#)” is “unrealistic, totally naive, almost stupid”.

“That we are going to live in a world free of drugs, which will never happen, which is never happening,” said Trujillo, apparently frustrated and even emotional. “It is totally stupid – unreachable.”

Other commissioners that joined the chorus

included former UK deputy prime minister Nick Clegg, former US Federal Reserve chairman Paul Volcker and former president of Mexico Ernesto Zedillo, among others.

It is so sad to see such a reform opportunity lost. However, on a positive note there is a marked division now between reformist and conservative countries which is better than an amorphous approach.

Writing

AIVL

On the 22nd of March we wrote to the Hon. Sussan Ley MP, the minister of health, to request that the government continued its funding for the Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL). We received a reply from Graeme Barden, the assistant secretary that confirmed, through the Communicable Disease Prevention and Services Improvement Grant Fund (CDPSIG Fund) that AIVL has been granted \$370,000 to undertake the community arm of the Hepatitis C Awareness Activities. The funding runs until the end of this year.

Inquiry into youth suicide and self harm in the ACT by the Health Ageing and Community and Social Services standing committee.

Bill Bush wrote a submission to the Assembly Standing Committee in regards to the effect of illicit and other drugs on the likelihood of youth suicide. In the introduction he noted that:

Families and Friends will explore the link between alcohol and illicit drugs and suicide. We will show that poor mental health is a driver for drug abuse and suicide. However, we will also demonstrate that illicit drug consumption leads to a higher chance of suicide than alcohol consumption due to the different ways Australians view alcohol and illicit drugs. The criminality surrounding consumption of drugs automatically brings disdain on the user and increases their marginalisation and reduces their chance of receiving appropriate health care.

This view was expanded and supported by many references in the body of the submission.

The following recommendations were made:

1. A drug research agency should be commissioned to develop standardised mortality ratios of users of different

addictive substances in Australia.

2. *Statistics should be assembled by coroners and published:*
 - a) *on whether the consumption of drugs causing death was taken with the intention of ending the victim's own life; and*
 - b) *whether those who intentionally take their own life by means other than the consumption of drugs were themselves drug users.*
3. *That the committee carefully consider the effect of criminalisation of drugs on the marginalisation of drug takers and how changes to drug policy would have a direct bearing on suicide rate.*
4. *The Government should develop effective:*
 - a) *holistic mental health and drug treatment services;*
 - b) *opiate pharmacotherapies successfully implemented overseas; and*
 - c) *combat widespread stigma found even among the caring professions against drug users.*

We are greatly indebted to Jan Lee for allowing her story to be included in the submission. Her FFDLR 2005 remembrance address can be seen at <http://www.ffdlr.org.au/memorial/docs/ReflectionsJL.htm>.

We expect to appear before the committee to talk to the submission.

Paperchain Promotion

A very successful evening occurred when Graham Downie and Marion McConnell discussed the Drug Law Wars at a promotion of the book by the Paperchain book shop on the 7th of April.

Graham was very supportive of the FFDLR philosophy in commending the book. We very much appreciate his time and thoughts in furthering circulation of Brian and Marion's important work.

The launch was attended by a significant number of FFDLR members, some potential new members, and MLA member Jason Hinder and the Green's ACT candidate Trish Cahill.

Common Cause

I attended a workshop run by the UK organisation Common Cause. The presenter was Eleanor Glen who is director of Common Cause in Australia. This organisation seeks to achieve *a growing network of people working to engage cultural values to create a more equitable, sustainable and democratic society.*

The purpose of the workshop was to provide practical communication skills based on scientific research into the use of values and framing. A useful handbook is available for download on the website <http://www.commoncause.org.au/>

The workshop discussed in detail the most effective way to tap into your audiences values in order to make them take seriously the arguments being presented. However, it is important to use intrinsic values, such as equality and wisdom rather than extrinsic ones of say wealth and social power. Using mixed values is a very poor approach.

Talking

Breaking the Ice in Our Community

Bill Bush and I attended the forum sponsored by the Queanbeyan City Council on the 5th of April. The meeting was very well attended and we ran a small stall.

Following an opening address by the Queanbeyan Mayor, Tim Overall, a number of presentations were made followed by a discussion forum. The presenters and panellists were Annie Bleeker (Australian Drug Foundation), Linda Wigginton (coordinator Drug and Alcohol, southern NSW local health district), Julie Tongs OAM (CEO Winnunga Nimmityja Aboriginal Health Service), Julie Clark (family Drug Support) and Police Inspector Neil Grey (Crime Manager).

Keen interest was maintained throughout the night with some challenging questions to the panel. Very informative videos stressing the importance of maintaining the connection with drug users can be seen at <http://adf.org.au/cdat-breaking-the-ice-resources>.

In response to a question from FFDLR, panellists concurred that the criminal nature of personal drug use has a negative impact on the uptake and effectiveness of treatments.

Meeting with MLA Shane Rattenbury

Bill Bush and I met with MLA Shane Rattenbury on the 14th of April. We set an agenda comprising:

- Roadside drug testing
- Prison NSP
- The Canberra Declaration, and
- Working together

We are indebted to Mr Rattenbury for a frank exchange of ideas and support for the FFDLR objectives. He took a courageous standing in asking the Assembly to endorse the recent Canberra Declaration. His was the only vote in the affirmative! Reading of page 83 in the Hansard Transcript

<http://www.hansard.act.gov.au/hansard/2016/pdfs/P160310.pdf>

is very informative in regards to the stance of some other MLA's.

Mr Rattenbury expressed a commitment to work closely with FFDLR in the lead up to the election.

Uniting Church Takes a Stand

Marion McConnell and Bill Bush, both members of FFDLR, along with Marianne Jauncey, Medical Director of the Supervised Injecting Centre, spoke at the recent Uniting Church NSW/ACT Synod meeting in Sydney where the proposals, as listed in the following media release, were passed.

The Uniting Church Canberra Region Presbytery Social Justice Group of which Marion and Bill are members, put the proposal to the Synod Uniting Justice Forum which then took it to the Synod meeting for approval last week. Marion and Bill are delighted that the church is putting the lives and well-being of people and the community as its first priority.

Uniting calls for a re-think on drugs

Uniting, the services and advocacy arm of the Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW and the ACT, is calling for a re-think on illegal drug use.

The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW and the ACT, at its recent Synod meeting has given the go-ahead for its services and congregations to call

for:

- *Increased investment in harm reduction and demand reduction strategies, and*
- *Further measures to decriminalise individual possession of small amounts of illegal drugs (not to decriminalise the illegal supply of drugs).*

A Uniting campaign will call on government leaders and policy makers to rethink their stance on illegal drugs – one based in compassion. Peter Worland, Executive Director of Uniting said, “There is a compelling case for us to take a new approach on drugs; a more compassionate response, a Christian response.”

Uniting will join with members of the legal and medical community to argue the case for decriminalisation, “People using illegal drugs in the community often resist help out of fear of being arrested. This fear prevents them from seeking help, and it ends up being either too little or too late. The consequences of drug use have touched almost every Australian family. We’re calling for some difficult conversations, but as a society, we can no longer ignore the evidence,” Mr Worland said.

The Medical Director of the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre, Dr Marianne Jauncey believes addressing the medical needs of people who use drugs is only half the challenge, “If our aim is to respect the inherent dignity of every person, we must re-frame the debate. I work with people every day who are trying to manage their dependence and get their lives back on track. Stigma and shame are big issues, and battling drug use convictions serves only to alienate people further. If we are a society which believes in giving people a fair go, if we believe in saving lives, we must do something differently.”

Uniting and Uniting Church congregations will join the growing community who have already put their name behind the medical and social evidence which proves a new approach is needed – including voices such as Sir Richard Branson, who recently visited the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre to learn more about its practices.

Rev Graham Long AM, CEO and Pastor at the Wayside Chapel said, “Experts the world over are beginning to agree that the “War on Drugs” is lost.

We've witnessed an amazing investment of resources in a policy that generally makes life worse for everyone. I'm delighted that the Synod is open to considering evidence and looking for a new way forward. We'll now have an army of voices championing the cause of the people we serve each day."

Ideas

I have presented examples of the sort of reading, writing and talking we have engaged in over the last month. I hope that some of our members may have time to take on some of this work. Despite the failure of UNGASS there are countries who have had the political courage to make changes to the law that save the lives of their citizens (odd to consider this courageous isn't it?). There is no reason why Australia cannot get on board and momentum is building. Marion's report from the Uniting Church validates this assertion. So how do we further tap into the changes that are afoot? What actions should we take? Who should we be talking to?

Give me a ring, or email, – or come along to the meeting this Thursday.

Peter Taylor

President

Finally – Pat Varga gave us some thoughts as to why illicit drug taking is often seen as only being a problem of those at the bottom of the social ladder and not an issue of the middle classes – and the impact that this has. Thanks Pat.

Listen to the stories

When you buy The Big Issue, the "Vendor Profile" on page 5 sometimes gives an insight into drug use.

Here is an example from a lady vendor: "I was always surrounded by violence, abuse and drugs....I was first introduced to drug taking by my father when I was a child, so it was easy to fall back into it in my thirties. Being abused and bullied my whole life had resulted in me hating myself, and I used drugs to escape the pain.

"I was always careful to do it away from my kids, and make sure they were safe. It took me 20 odd years to come out on the other side and begin to rebuild myself and turn my life around."

She said the Big Issue made her confident and improved her self esteem. "I like to mentor new vendors, the same way other vendors did for me when I first started."

There are other articles too, from time to time, about drugs. Julian Ogle, a Melbourne based writer and guest speaker for The Big Issue Classroom, wrote about his time in jail and the availability of drugs in jail.

Another prisoner gave him this advice: "Stay out of the prison economy - drugs and trading.

Making it known you have something of value (which in prison is everything) makes you a target, and automatically involves you in prison politics.

He gives an account of buying drugs when he was in prison in Melbourne. The man he bought drugs from said to him: "Why did you buy it from him? Why did you chop me out? And that's before considering the crazy inflated prices - \$20 for a match head sized bit of weed out of some dude's prison wallet. It's really not worth all the hassle."

Years ago there was an item in the news about a man who admitted using drugs on weekends with friends. He said he had no problem at all living a 'normal' life. He had a job and friends. Unspoken in that story are three issues: Was the drug safe? If you had a bad reaction who could you go to without fear of jail? Who could you go to for treatment?

In her book, "A small book about Drugs" Lisa Pryor interviewed many users. Some who used their first illegal drug out of curiosity and maintained a habit and a job, and as one woman said: continued to pay the mortgage.

Pryor suggested that drug users: the educated, employed and well off ones, who manage their habit should 'come out' and take part in the drug debate. She believes their silence has a lot to do with making mainstream politicians reluctant to show some sympathy for drug decriminalisation.

Do mainstream politicians buy The Big Issue? Do they have relatives or friends who are drug users?

By Pat Varga