

**ADDRESS TO**  
**ANNUAL REMEMBRANCE DAY CEREMONY**  
**7 NOVEMBER 2005**

**FAMILY AND FRIENDS FOR DRUG LAW REFORM**

I want to welcome all of you who attend here today to take part in this annual act of remembrance for those who are the victims of illicit drug use.

For 10 years now family and friends have gathered at this beautiful spot, providing an opportunity each November to reflect on the human cost of a social problem that has afflicted our community now for at least three generations. It is a time both to draw comfort and understanding from the collective experience of other friends and family who have lost someone dear to them, and to engage in a private act of tribute to someone's memory.

No doubt each year we all hope that the list of names of those we remember will be a little shorter than the previous year, that there will be some sign of abatement in the death toll attributable to illicit drugs. Perhaps it is just my imagination, but each year the list seems a little longer, not shorter.

This gathering is in fact an occasion to bear witness to a multiplicity of private tragedies, as well as to a social or collective one.

The great tragedy which laces that list with sadness is that these deaths are avoidable. A person who uses illicit drugs – whether through the influence of others around them or because they have become addicted – uses a product for which there is absolutely no quality control. The substance they ingest or inject may be heavily adulterated or lethally pure; the distinction is critical but in general there is no way a user can make that distinction.

And so they assume a considerable risk, often because physiologically their bodies give them no choice. And therein lies the tragedy: what other product, used by thousands of Australians, and with such potential to harm, is so unregulated by any competent authority as to its quality? There is more government control over the contents of a can of hairspray or a tube of toothpaste than there is over an ecstasy tablet, and to the best of my knowledge no Australian has ever died misusing hairspray or toothpaste.

That central reality seriously undercuts any policy of harm minimisation, since such a policy can only assist an individual with the *consequences* of their use, but not with assessing the risks inherent in *what* they use.

Of course, the fear that prevents us from exercising quality control over illicit drugs is the fear that this would send a signal to our young that drug use, so regulated, is now OK. And it is understandable that we should not lightly reverse decades of public policy focussed on the message that any drug use is dangerous, however well regulated.

I think that fear can be exaggerated. At the present moment we wage a war of sorts on licit drugs, such as tobacco, while at the same time regulating the ingredients in a cigarette packet. The vast majority of our community is I think able to make sense of that mixed signal in this respect. Why not in others?

I have had the privilege of serving this year on the Senate Select Committee on Mental Health. ("Privilege" might seem a strange word to use; but in fact members of the committee have had a sense of privilege in listening to the deeply personal stories of people affected by mental illness.) The evidence we have heard has highlighted the many intersections between illicit drug addiction and mental ill health. Indeed the Australian Medical Association lists substance use disorder as a form of mental dysfunction. It produced figures suggesting that in 1996 nearly 42,000 people in Australia suffered an illness associated with heroin or polydrug dependence. Over 170,000 had mental disorders associated with cannabis dependence and 38,000 with other drugs. That's over a quarter of a million Australians in 1996. I am not aware of any more recent figures.

Nowhere is that crossover between mental illness and drug abuse more evident than in looking at Australia's prison population. Witnesses to the inquiry have suggested that anywhere between 10 and 90% of prison inmates in this country suffer or have suffered from some form of mental illness. Of course, a very substantial part of that higher estimate includes those convicted of drug offences committed to satisfy a personal addiction.

Most Australians would regard it as unconscionable that people suffering any kind of disease or illness should be denied access to treatment and rehabilitation for that illness. Certainly we on the select committee have discerned a growing sense of disquiet that so many mentally ill Australians are indeed untreated for their affliction. So if, as the AMA suggests, drug addiction is best understood as a psychological problem rather than a lifestyle issue, why do we continue to treat drug abuse primarily in a criminal law context rather than primarily in a health context?

It is questions such as this that has motivated those of us in the Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform. The Group encompasses a variety of perspectives on drug policy, but members share a conviction that there are serious shortcomings in aspects of Australian drug policy. Concerns include that, although there are occasional successes in interdicting the entry of some drugs into Australia, the

supply of illicit drugs is unrelenting. Another is that the demand for addictive drugs drives a large proportion of the crimes – such as burglary, assault and theft – which affect every Australian. Yet another is that the age at which children are first using drugs is apparently getting lower.

The Group will be holding a forum in December to raise the profile of some of these issues, and remind the community that crime and deaths by overdose remain intractable features of a drug-using society in the present environment.

However, we need occasions like this to remind us that the statistics we talk about are real people, with real potential, whose opportunity to grow and develop and find happiness as members of our society has been lost in circumstances that can invariably be described as tragic. We all make mistakes, but the price of our mistakes is never as high as it is for a person who dies through using an illicit drug.

If there is one thing we can do to change the climate that allows such deaths to occur, it is to individually help knock down the popular identification between drug addiction and moral turpitude. Using drugs is stupid, but even the best people can make the occasional stupid mistake. There are many forms of addiction, after all, and many of us can count our blessings that the things we are addicted to are legal, and sanctioned by the society in which we live.

Finally, let's give thanks today for the lives of those we remember. Let's remember the promise those lives represented, and let's commit ourselves to advancing the sort of society where such lives need not be pointlessly lost again.