

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) Inc

Committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use

NEWSLETTER

September, 2017



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NEXT MEETING

Thursday 28th September
Business meeting at 7.30pm
Guest speaker at 8.00pm

Speaker: Chris Gough, Manager of CAHMA and the Connection

Topic: Current drug issues in the ACT.

Chris will bring us up to date on matters relating to the ACT including the present availability of illicit drugs, the issues that drug users are experiencing with services etc the naloxone program and the future direction of CAHMA. There will be time for discussion and questions.

For further information call Marion on 61697678

St Ninian's Uniting Church hall,
cnr Mouat and Brigalow Sts, LYNEHAM

DATE FOR YOUR DIARY Remembrance Ceremony

Monday 23rd October, 2017

If you would like a family member remembered at the ceremony please contact Marion on 61697678

Further information on attached invitation.

Don't forget to bring flowers and a chair to sit on if you wish.

Editorial

This is a very critical time in the life of FFDLR. It is a time when Drug Law Reform is not only attracting more publicity but more respectability. It is a time when it is vital that FFDLR continue to make sure the voices of families are heard. Family voices must be heard amongst those of AOD workers, researchers, politicians, law enforcers and the general population as well, of course, those of marginalised drug users who have hopes and dreams as much as anyone else. Advocacy is happening here in the ACT for pill testing at the Spilt Milk music festival in the ACT in December. Pressure is on in Victoria to open a medically

supervised injecting centre. These changes do not happen easily and we cannot afford to sit back and just hope it all goes ahead. We need sensible voices in the mix. We need the voices of families, and others most affected by bad policy.

FFDLR has been struggling over the past couple of years following the loss of Brian who did most of the IT work. Peter Taylor took over the position of President at a difficult time and did a marvellous job for over 12 months but has recently resigned the following. The following motion was recorded at the FFDLR committee meeting in July:

The Committee of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform wishes to place on record its heartfelt gratitude to Peter Taylor, our president, who is resigning. Peter stepped up to the presidency at a time of crisis for our Association when Brian McConnell was unable to carry on and it would otherwise have ceased. It was a role that Peter never sought or indeed one that he felt himself fitted to perform. Against his better judgement he allowed himself to be drafted, aware that he and his preeminent qualifications for the role were the empathy and moral authority he was able to bring to bear because of the loss of his beloved son, Sam. It was a role he took on while his grieving was still fresh.

This committee wishes to acknowledge Peter Taylor's courage as well as his competence in fulfilling the role thrust upon him. Peter drew upon skills and capacities that he never credited himself with possessing.

Because of Peter's clear thinking, powers of advocacy and preparedness to put those in power on the spot, the Association is closer to achieving its objective of securing better drug policies.

Bill Bush has now taken on the position of President and Marion feels more able to contribute through secretarial work. However we need more people to volunteer their expertise. The AGM will be held in November when all positions will be declared vacant.

What we most need are members who have some expertise in administration, social media and traditional media. Someone who could help organise meetings with politicians and others who have influence in drug policy. Someone who would help with website and twitter and perhaps get our facebook page operating again. A couple of website tutorials would be most helpful. We are presently using Wordpress. Someone who could update media contacts for our press releases. Small jobs on their own but if one person has to do the lot it becomes somewhat overbearing. Please consider where your skills are and offering a hand to keep FFDLR a viable organisation. Even if you can help for a short time it would be appreciated. For instance setting up a list of up to date media contacts could be a short project.

FFDLR ACTIVITIES

Canberra Conversations

This is a regular event organised by the Institute of Governance and Policy Analysis (IGPA). On July 27 the IGPA in consultation with FFDLR organised an event titled - "Heroin Prescription: The need for rational policy." Dr Marianne Jauncey, Medical Director at the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Sydney's Kings Cross and David McDonald, interdisciplinary social scientist and policy analyst were the speakers and Michael Moore former, CEO of the Public Health Association of Australia and New President of the World Federation of Public Health. Michael is a long time friend who described in *Drug Law Wars* his efforts as a former Independent member of the ACT Legislative Assembly and chair of an Assembly Committee that initiated the proposal for a heroin prescription trial in the ACT, facilitated the panel discussion.

This event was held to commemorate 20 years since the heroin prescription trial was vetoed by the Prime Minister, Mr John Howard and evidence was given that this treatment option should be available today for those for whom other treatments don't work. Public policy discourse on heroin prescription and more generally drug law reform, is invariably influenced by morality politics, with entrenched ideological positions. The seminar was well attended and we are indebted to Jon Stanhope and Prof Khalid Ahmed from the IGPA for organising this event.

Volunteering Expo 2017



Pat Varga, Joan Westaway and Marion McConnell attended the recent Volunteering Expo 2017 where they set up a stall with over 40 other not-for-profit organisations. The Volunteering Expo is a one stop shop for individuals to find out about volunteering opportunities across the Canberra Region. We, at the FFDLR stall were delighted with the number of people who chatted at length and seemed keen to offer their skills to our organisation. We will be organising meetings with these volunteers to see where they can best volunteer their skills.

Uniting Church Campaign for Drug Law Reform

Bill and Marion have been actively involved in the Uniting Church's campaign on Drug Law Reform. Information on this can be found at <https://nswact.uca.org.au/social-justice/the-social-justice-forum/drug-law-reform-campaign/>. Bill and Marion attended a workshop of supporters of the Uniting Campaign where a strategy was developed. Marion also spoke at a forum held at the Parramatta Mission on 21st August and again at a fund raising Gala dinner on 8th September.

Monash University Drug Discussion

The following talk was given by Bill Bush, President of FFDLR at a Drug Policy Forum organised by the Monash Student Association Welfare Department as part of its wider student campaign around drug safety and harm minimisation in Melbourne on 29th August.

Why am I involved in drug law reform? There are four reasons. Firstly, the criminalisation of drug users causes far more harm than the drugs themselves.

Secondly, it stimulates the supply of the very substances that it purports to eliminate.

In short it is not just ineffective, it promotes the supply of drugs. Fundamentally, we have a supply problem. As the New South Wales Crime Commission puts it: "offshore interests decide the volume of drugs that are imported into Australia and the domestic drug consumption market will consume whatever is available."

Thirdly it is unjust. It is wrong for governments to persevere with policies that inflict harm on their people particularly on young people as drug policy does.

A burning sense of injustice gave birth in 1995 to Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform when a young man who had overdosed was scared out of his wits by police interrogating him. Alarmed he left on a hurried holiday, used alone in a motel room this time with no friend to call for help. He used alone and he died alone.

A drug free ethic places a higher priority on drug freeness than life itself. That is wrong.

It is wrong because drug policy finances serious and organised crime that threatens the fabric of our society.

It is wrong to persevere with a policy that fosters intergenerational disadvantage; a policy that is implicated in virtually all of Australia's most intractable and costly social problems.

It undermines the capacity of drug users to take responsibility for their own lives and for those dependent upon them.

It infringes fundamental principles of freedom in subjecting to the criminal law what one injects in one's own body.

It is thereby the most extreme example of nanny state over reach.

Fourthly, prohibition is stupid.

It underpins the profitability of the drug market that it purports to eliminate.

By aggravating the factors that lead drug users to dabble in drugs in the first place it promotes drug use.

It gives rise to the ridiculous spectacle of politicians perversely imposing obligations of mutual responsibility on the very people whose capacity they have undermined.

It is undeniable that drug use is associated with severe harms to the user in terms of blood-borne diseases, acquired brain injury, death, mental health problems, poverty and on and on but I needn't tell a university audience that correlation does not equate to causation. We know that most or all of these harms are avoidable with different drug policies.

A drug policy anchored in the criminal law thus infringes the

fundamental rule of research and medical practice: do no harm.

So, Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform wants drug policy changed because it is harmful, it stimulates supply, it is unjust and it is stupid.

Thank you.

Victorian Parliamentary Committee on Drug Law Reform

On 21st September our long-standing loyal Melbourne members, Jo Wade and Brenda Irwin joined Bill in appearing before the Victorian Parliamentary Road and Community Safety Committee inquiring into drug law reform. The committee chaired by Mr Geoff Howard, member for Buninyong, consists of three ALP members, three from the Liberal Party Opposition and Fiona Patten, Leader of the Australian Sex Party paid close attention to Jo and Brenda as they related the story of their respective daughters whose death from an overdose as young women would not have taken place had different drug policies been in place. Brenda has travelled from Melbourne to attend many of our remembrance ceremonies and Jo put herself forward to speak as the family member at the 2010 ceremony. Their testimony supplemented that of Marion who joined the Uniting Church in a hearing before the same committee in Sydney on 23 May. The transcript of Marion's evidence is at <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/lrrcsc/article/2811>.

We emphasised that heroin assisted treatment offered a politically low risk strategy to reform our harmful drug policies:

- the evidence of the benefits of heroin assisted treatment is very strong from Switzerland and other countries like Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Canada;
- health benefits of the treatment include elimination of overdose fatalities and other adverse health impacts and social benefits in terms of reduced engagement in drug dealing and property crime and in integration;
- the disruption of the illicit drug market and a greater than 80% reduction in recruitment of novice drug users;
- supervision of heroin assisted treatment is closely controlled in the hands of the medical profession;
- documented health and social benefits from the treatment are reaped quickly within Australian electoral cycles.

Because of the solid evidence base it would not be necessary to undertake a trial in Australia. Even so, presenting the introduction of the treatment as a trial could facilitate its political acceptability.

BREAKING NEWS

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FFDLR congratulates the ACT Government for taking the step and approving a trial of pill testing at the Spilt Milk Festival in November.

This is about saving lives of young people and it is a step forward for sensible drug policy.

“One thing that we've made very clear is that we won't be telling people that it's safe to use a particular drug. There are harms associated with any drug use. What we're trying to do is make it safer”, said Gino Vumbacca from Harm Minimisation Australia.

The following letter written by Bill Bush and published in the Canberra Times on 24 August gives FFDLR's perspective on the government's latest crack down on drug use

Drugs test is a fail

The Commonwealth's intended drug testing of welfare recipients will push not just them to the brink (“Welfare drug tests ‘will push users to the brink’,” August 23, p9).

Compulsory drug testing will intensify the marginalisation of the most marginalised.

Such testing will aggravate the factors that led the drug users to dabble in drugs in the first place.

It will load more financial strain and worry on families forced to pick up the burden the government has dropped.

It will destroy the financial viability of struggling drug treatment services that rely on the welfare payments of their patients.

The Commonwealth has failed miserably to keep drugs out of the country.

Indeed, it is clear that prohibition stimulates supply and guarantees availability.

So having failed to keep its side of the bargain, the Commonwealth is coming after young Australians, their families and drug treatment services.

Even if cutting off welfare payments improves the budget bottom line of the Commonwealth, it will blow out that of States and Territories that shoulder the greater part of law enforcement and health costs of a drug policy set at the Federal level.

Bill Bush, President, Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform, Turner

Australia should start providing heroin assisted treatment

By Harm Reduction Australia <http://www.harmreductionaustralia.org.au/>

published by the International Drug Policy Consortium on 13 September, 2017

Heroin Assisted Treatment involves supervising prescribed pharmaceutical heroin self-administration with intensive psycho-social help to a minority of people with severe heroin dependence who have not benefitted from multiple other treatments.

The signatories of this letter include senior clinicians and researchers, major health organisations, peer based organisations and people with long standing experience and expertise in the fields of law enforcement, drug policy and drug treatment.

We support the urgent introduction of Heroin Assisted Treatment in Australia.

Twenty years ago this month in August 1997, the then Federal Cabinet decided against notifying the UN Commission on Narcotic Drugs of an intention to conduct an Australian trial of Heroin Assisted Treatment. Consequently, the proposed trial had to be abandoned.

Since then, trials of supervised heroin assisted treatment in seven countries with a combined total of more than 1,500 people using street heroin have found that this treatment was more effective than high quality methadone treatment for people with severe heroin dependence who had not benefitted from multiple other treatments.

Heroin Assisted Treatment, as well as more recently treatment with other injectable opioids, has been demonstrated to improve physical and mental health, reduce the use of street heroin, reduce criminal activity and improve social functioning. This treatment also saves a lot more money than it costs to provide or the current cost to the community of not treating people with severe heroin dependence.

Heroin Assisted Treatment is only needed for a small minority of the heroin using population. However, research in Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, Germany, Canada, Belgium and the UK has shown its benefit for individuals, families and communities is often quite profound.

In the last twenty years, notwithstanding some important advances, Australia's drug policy decisions have generally failed to take heed of the evidence. As a result, the drug market has been expanding its reach and continually developing new and more dangerous drugs. In addition, similar to many other countries, the number of heroin and other opioid overdose deaths here have once again been increasing.

Heroin Assisted Treatment is not the first option treatment for people using heroin who want help to regain control of their lives. It is however our most effective option when other treatments haven't worked.

It is now clear from all the international evidence available that the 1997 Federal Cabinet made the wrong decision regarding a trial of Heroin Assisted Treatment. As a result, far too many lives have been lost, far too many families have been left devastated and far too much harm has befallen our communities.

It's time to correct that decision and introduce Heroin Assisted Treatment in Australia now.

Legislation on Mandatory Drug Testing of Welfare Recipients

from Radio Australia 18 September, 2017

How would the proposed drug trials work?

If legislation currently before the Parliament passes, the Turnbull Government plans to introduce a two-year drug testing trial for 5000 people in three locations: Canterbury-Bankstown (NSW), Logan (QLD) and Mandurah (WA).

From January 1, 2018, unemployed people newly claiming Newstart Allowance and Youth Allowance would have to agree to be tested in order to start receiving their payments.

They could then be selected for random testing of illicit drugs, including ice (methamphetamine), ecstasy and marijuana.

Those refusing to take the test would have their welfare payments cancelled immediately.

People who tested positive for drugs would be placed on an income management program for the duration of the trial.

As a consequence, 20 per cent of their welfare payment would be available in cash, with the remaining 80 per cent only accessible through a so-called BasicsCard.

The card would quarantine the bulk of the person's payment for essentials such as food and rent, and for bills from approved providers.

The aim is to stop cash being available to unemployed people to buy illicit drugs.

Under the scheme, a second drug test would be scheduled within 25 days. Anyone testing positive a second time would then be referred to a privately contracted medical professional who would assess them and identify treatment options.

Anyone who refused to take the second test would have their payments cancelled.

The explanatory memorandum to the legislation says the aim of the trial "is to improve a recipient's capacity to find employment or participate in education or training by identifying people with drug use issues and assisting them to undertake treatment".

It says: "Substance abuse is a major barrier to social and economic participation and is not consistent with community expectations around receiving taxpayer funded welfare payments."

Ed's Note:

(In a position paper published by the ANCD in 2013 it says "There is no evidence that drug testing welfare beneficiaries will have any positive effects for those individuals or for society, and some evidence indicating such a practice would have a high social and economic costs.")

Don't forget the meeting with Chris Gough, CAHMA on Thursday 28th at 7.30pm and the 22nd ANNUAL REMEMBRANCE CEREMONY ON MONDAY 23RD OCTOBER