



FAMILIES & FRIENDS FOR DRUG LAW REFORM

NEWSLETTER FEBRUARY 2018

Mental Health and Drugs

Over the past few weeks *The Canberra Times* has given a lot of publicity to the heartbreaking case of a young man, Paul. He died after he struggled with mental health issues and his dependency on prescription pharmaceuticals. His death occurred just hours after he was discharged from Canberra Hospital despite an overdose earlier in the day and threats of self harm. A seven year long coroner's inquest documented a series of failures by ACT Health.

Paul's case has much that resonates with our members. It has long been recognised that anxiety and depression of youth are potent risk factors associated with illicit drug use. Those drugs are seen as a crutch to support many lacking self confidence while navigating their teenage years. If dependency develops, whether to legal or illegal drugs, the apparent promise that those drugs will help the young person cope, more often than not turns out to be false and pre-existing depression intensified. The rates

of suicide among dependent drug users is many times higher than in the community at large.

The alienation and marginalisation that dependent drug users typically experience only deepens their despair.

Thanks to the tenacious campaigning of Paul's mother and the excellent investigative journalism of a *Canberra Times* journalist, Daniel Burdon, who chronicled in the paper the many failures of the ACT health system, the ACT Health Minister was moved to take the remarkable step of issuing a qualified apology. Whether it leads to better coordination of health services in common but complex cases like Paul's is yet to be seen.

The challenge facing the health system is made so much more intense by the much greater prescription of opiate painkillers. The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre reported last July that in:

"The alienation and marginalisation that dependent drug users typically experience only deepens their despair"

"... 2013, the last year for which finalised data is available, just under 600 (597) Australians between the ages of 15 and 54 died from accidental overdose of opioids with the majority 70% being due to opioids other than heroin, including strong prescription painkillers. Initial estimates for 2014 and 2015 indicate that the number of accidental opioid deaths is continuing to increase."

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First FFDLR meeting for 2018

- **Thursday 22nd February**
- Meeting at 7.30pm speaker at 8.00pm
- St Ninian's Uniting Church Hall, cnr Brigalow and Mouat Sts, Lyneham
- **SPEAKER: Dr Paul Kelly, ACT Chief Health Officer**
- **TOPIC:** Update on the ACT Drug Services

Mental Health and Drugs

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It is scant consolation that less young people are dying:

"The vast majority of deaths involve prescription opioids rather than heroin, including strong painkillers such as oxycodone and fentanyl, and are among older Australians in their 30s, 40s and 50s."

Paradoxically there is strong reason to believe that the recently imposed requirement that many over-the-counter medications will be available by prescription only will just make the situation worse. Families and Friends have pointed out at every available opportunity that unless adequate drug dependency services are established, clamping down on doctor shopping will drive those who have become dependent upon legal medication to source their continuing supply from the black market. In that case, the only people to benefit from the well meant change will be criminal drug dealers.

There is said to be a dire shortage of treatment places available for those who seek one. This calls for a vastly increased investment in treatment of drug dependency with actual holistic co-operation between mental health and drug treatment services, with providing services that retain drug users in treatment. This is preferable to much more expensive initiatives like drug courts which rely upon the criminal law to act as gatekeeper and enforcer in the

likely event of relapse. Ultimately, those suffering from an addiction will overcome that addiction only if they are personally committed to doing so. Coerced drug treatment is less cost-effective and less effective than voluntary treatment. In the words of a study commissioned by the Australian National Council on Drugs:

There is potential for compulsory AOD treatment to produce unintended negative consequences. Current practices can result in net-widening, displacement from treatment, and discrimination against minority groups.

In addition governments should introduce treatments supported by a strong evidence base – heroin assisted treatment and a trial of hydromorphone, to name just two.

The situation of Paul and the resurgence of opiate overdose deaths points to failures in the health system which are of keen relevance to those struggling to secure less stigmatising, less marginalising and more effective drug policies. These developments should drive home the message that now there is an even wider constituency whose life and well-being is imperiled by existing drug policy.

Snippets of recent events

Over the past few months there have been some significant events relating to drug law reform issues.

The accident at Sussex Inlet on the South Coast of NSW was reported to have involved a driver returning to Ulladulla from a methadone clinic in Nowra.

FFDLR's President wrote a short opinion piece which is on the FFDLR website in part saying: "*the obvious and most effective measure is to establish methadone prescription services wherever they are needed rather than bar someone in need of health services from accessing those services by cancelling his/her licence*".

Drug testing of welfare recipients began on a trial basis in 3 locations in January. Bill Bush, FFDLR's President had an article published in *newmatilda.com* on November 10 regarding this issue. It was entitled "the Mad Merry-Go-Round of Starving Welfare Recipients off Drugs" and can be found on FFDLR's website. Bill writes, "*the best research available does not support the Turnbull Government's get tough on welfare drug users approach*".

An injecting room trial got the green light from the Andrew's Labor government in Victoria. This is certainly a step forward but we need to watch how this is progressing. We would be interested in hearing from our Victorian members on this.

Pill testing at dance parties is still a controversial matter. The ACT government approved it for the Spilt Milk Festival which was held in November 2017. However this was stopped by interference from

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**DON'T
FORGET
THE FFDLR
MEETING
ON 22ND
FEBRUARY
WITH DR
PAUL
KELLY.**

Letters to the Editor—Bill Bush

War on drugs has failed

The key message of Kate Aubusson's "Changing face of Australia's drug misuse" (Sunday Times, January 28, p17) is that drug law enforcement has completely failed to stem a procession of different and increasingly harmful new drugs.

The Australian Crime Commission writes that "organised crime groups are profit driven, constantly looking to new opportunities, operating across domestic and international borders." A Bureau of Statistics commissioned study estimated that in 2010 the Australian illicit drug trade was worth \$7.57bn, which fuels serious and organised crime.

Big time dealers have devised a perfect business model. The retail trade with peer selling to willing peer is very hard for police to penetrate. Moreover, if user dealers can't raise money from dealing they will engage in

prostitution or petty crime thus spreading the suffering.

In fact, criminal prohibition and the direct marketing system guarantee the profitability of organised crime and incentivise the procession of drugs that Aubusson reports. Prohibition has brought to market highly potent cannabis, a constellation of designer drugs and

“drug law enforcement has completely failed to stem a procession of different and increasingly harmful new drugs”

now fentanyl, the most potent and lethal of them all.

How many times must

we double down and try yet again to do what has failed?

Published Canberra Times 4 February

Codeine restrictions

There are at least two yawning sinkholes in the restrictions described in The Canberra Times editorial of Friday February 2, now imposed on what were over-the-counter pain medications like codeine (Law change a hard pill to swallow, The Canberra Times, p. 16). Firstly, it is all very well to counsel chronic pain sufferers not to go down the self-medication route but instead "work out a pain management plan in conjunction with their GP or a specialist". However, the paper earlier described the plight of a woman with chronic pain who had to wait two years for an appointment. The report added that "it takes nine to 12 months for public patients to get an appointment at the pain management unit at Canberra Hospital" (CT January 31, p.2).



Secondly, there is a vital need for enough opiate treatment places for those who have become dependent upon over-the-counter or prescription pharmaceuticals. As the CEO of the large ACT treatment service, Directions, wrote in a letter: "There is an urgent need to increase investment in specialist drug and alcohol treatment services and better educate clinicians across the health sector on how to respond to people who experience drug and alcohol issues." (CT January 26, p. 22.)

If these failings are not rectified, the clampdown on availability of medications will simply boost demand for illicit drugs and swell the bottom line of drug dealers

Published Canberra Times 6 February

Snippets of recent events

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the Federal Government. It is expected that this will be overcome at a festival to take place in the ACT in late April. An article in the Canberra Times on 3 February reported that "The ACT government has been notified by the STA-SAFE Consortium that they intend to submit a proposal to conduct pill testing at the Canberra

Groovin the Moo Festival in April 2018."

The reporting date for the Victorian Government's Inquiry into Drug Law Reform is 9 March. There were well over 200 submissions most of which believed we needed to move away from prohibition policies. We are looking forward to a positive report.

The failure of ACT Government to invest in vital

services in the AOD sector for some 8 years was reported this week in the Canberra Times. A few days before this it was also reported that a \$17 million boost was to be given to health and security at Alexander Maconochie Centre. Surely it would be better to spend money on the health system outside the jail. This could prevent the need for people to go to jail.

Many changes have been occurring in the AOD policy area within the ACT government and to help us understand what is happening we are privileged to have Dr Paul Kelly speak at a meeting on Thursday February 22nd. Further information elsewhere in this newsletter. Please try to attend.

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Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform began in March 1995 following the death by overdose of eight young people in Canberra. At the request of one father, Michael Moore, then Independent Member of the ACT Legislative Assembly, called a meeting to include families who had been affected. Forty people attended this first meeting which was the beginning of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform. All in attendance believed that the drug laws were more the problem than the solution and called for change. They wanted laws and policies that caused less harm. They wanted addiction to be treated as a health and social issue not a law enforcement one. They believed that the huge profits made by the illegal trade made drugs more available to their kids. Their efforts continue today. If not already please consider becoming a member via the website ffdlr.org.au.

**Snippets from
overseas**

It is of concern that Donald Trump, President of the United States is reinvigorating the federal war on drugs. Obama pulled back the federal war on drugs but Trump and his Attorney General Jeff Sessions are undoing that work.

Trump said recently, "Countries that are very harsh on drug epidemics and take it very seriously have less difficulty curbing the problem".

And in the Philippines we are dismayed to hear of the continued killings of anyone connected with drugs whether they be users, pushers or just merely suspected of some connection.

The International Criminal Court announced recently that it was opening a preliminary examination into allegations of extrajudicial killings under Duterte's campaign against illegal drugs, which has left thousands dead.



**SUPPORT THE FAMILY
IMPROVE THE OUTCOME**



Please join us in
supporting families at the 2018

International Family Drug Support Day

Date: Monday 26th February 2018

Time: 1:00 pm – 2:00 pm

Venue: Parliament House, Canberra

Keynote address by
Tony Trimmingham OAM
CEO and Founder of
Family Drug Support

Speakers include:
Parliamentary representatives
Family members
Other key speakers

*Any family anywhere in
Australia, regardless of
background, economic and
other circumstances, can be
affected by drugs*

Registration by 17th February is essential.
For more details see internationalfdsday.fds.org.au

**Register
Now**

