

NEWSLETTER



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NEXT MEETING

Thursday 25 June 2015, 7.30pm
St Ninian's Uniting Church hall,
cnr Mouat and Brigalow Sts, LYNEHAM

Meetings are followed by refreshments and time for a chat.

Editorial

Only part of the picture

If one listens carefully to all that is being said in the media about illicit drugs it becomes clear that only part of the picture is being portrayed. Media and many families simply talk about the deficiency of treatment services as if it exists in a vacuum. Members of Parliaments are more comfortable with this discussion than looking for real solutions.

There is no doubt that there is a shortfall in treatment services. A person seeking treatment needs treatment now, not after a long time sitting on a waiting list, sometimes up to 6 months. The crisis is now and the opportunity is now. But if that crisis and the need is not fulfilled then a visit to the dealer solves the problem and an opportunity is lost.

The shortfall in treatment services is largely because about three quarters of the available funding is allocated to law enforcement whose focus is mainly on criminality - recall that over 80 percent of arrests are of drug users. Such a practice harms the individual and does little to help them get their drug use under control. There is a fiction about law enforcement - that it will solve our drug problems by disrupting the supply chain and will dissuade users by the threat of severe punishment. This fiction is aided and abetted by law enforcement with stories of the big (or biggest) drug bust.

Media loves these stories and perpetuates the myth. People read the stories and do not question them, after all it is the police that are telling us and who can we believe if not the police?

In a sense a barrier is built limiting the discussion simply to inadequacy of drug treatment.

Listening to ABC's Background Briefing "On thin ice" a few Sunday mornings ago is a case in point. The report centred around drug users seeking treatment, drug users

managing their drug use and the need for more treatment. Little was said about things behind that barrier.

Perhaps if the bigger picture was reported in programs like background briefing that barrier might be broken down. A more expansive discussion which included the whole picture might then be encouraged and a more effective strategy could then emerge. To this end the following letter has been sent to the producer of background briefing:

The Producer

ABC Background Briefing

I listened with interest to your Background Briefing program on the ice epidemic' ("On thin ice") on Sunday 7 June.

While it was interesting there was very little that was new to me or anyone who has taken an interest in the subject of illicit drugs for more than 20 years. There was little that showed the way to better resolving issues with ice or any of the other illicit drugs. That is to say other than to point out that there is insufficient funding and expertise for treatment. But this is not new - that there has been too few treatments and rehabilitation centres was being said 10 - 15 years ago for the then heroin 'epidemic'.

There are few who would disagree that treatment works. Not for everyone but for many. Similarly there are few who would disagree that treatment is needed for those who have lost control of their drug use and that more treatment facilities and services are needed.

But in the long term while individuals may change we will still have about the same number of people using drugs and the same number of people needing treatment. We are caught in a groundhog day type of cycle and your program gave no tips or clues in how to get out of that cycle. And it is almost predictable that not long after the ice taskforce has completed its investigations and the report has been considered there will be another drug that is causing problems.

A follow up Background Briefing program which examines the full picture in respect of illicit drugs would be a useful addition to the debate and could introduce a new paradigm for illicit drug policy for Australia.

Such a program would examine the principal reasons why prohibition was introduced including the predictions and expectations of such a scheme. The program could then

move to an examination of the results of that scheme. Has it stopped or reduced drug use? Has it caused more, or less harm to society, to families, to individuals? Why are there so many arrests of users and only very few suppliers arrested? Why are there so many big drug busts and yet the problem persists? What have been the other unexpected consequences?

These questions will lead to discussion of the black market and profits caused by prohibition, the growth of law enforcement and the prison system at the expense of treatment, and a conclusion that the system rather than stopping or reducing illicit drugs, it is now self-perpetuating. For example drug seizures by law enforcement supposedly keep prices high which in turn maintains high profits, attracting those interested in such quick high profits and thus perpetuate the market. In parallel the drugs in the market evolve to stronger, more potent, more easily made or smuggled drugs such as the evolution of speed to ice, opium to heroin. Other markets have also developed such as the internet.

Finally your program could explore the emerging trends by many overseas countries and to the lessons learned by them. This would include:

- Supervised injecting rooms of which Sydney has the only one in Australia whereas overseas countries have many,
- Prescription and supervised use of heroin which demonstrated improved health and social wellbeing but also reduced crime and the heroin black market - Switzerland, The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark, and many other countries,
- Decriminalisation of personal use - Portugal, Mexico
- Withdrawal from Drug Treaties - Uruguay
- Legalisation - cannabis in the USA.
- The changing attitudes in the UN - in particular note that the preamble to the 1988 UN drug convention acknowledges the failure of its prohibition regime (for example "Deeply concerned by the magnitude of and rising trend in the illicit production of, demand for and traffic in narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances..."),
- Exploration of the range of options such as those identified by the Global Commission on Drugs, Transform etc.

Should you wish to discuss the matter further my phone number is 02 6169 7678 and my email is mcconnell@ffdlr.org.au.

Brian McConnell
President

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

20 Years of FFDLR

Our 20 year book celebrating 20 years of FFDLR is coming along well and is expected to be launched later this year. The title of the book will be "The drug law wars - twenty years of families fighting at the front".

This book is being written to commemorate 20 years of FFDLR fighting to right a wrong, for what will provide better protection for our children and so that children in the future will survive the dangers that currently characterise exposure in the drug culture and that they have a better chance living through their drug using experience. This book also highlights the significant events and chronicles the fight that parents have had to change the drug laws - parents who have had experience, often tragic experiences, and have seen the fundamental flaws in the current system. It has also involved many community members who have not had personal experiences but are convinced that the prohibition drug laws cause more harm than ever intended.

It presents a series of themes rather than a chronological record of FFDLR over the last 20 years. It has been a fight and continues to be a fight for a better system, not unlike any conflict, not unlike any war.

If you have any expertise that might be helpful in getting the book published we would be pleased to hear from you. Also for the next two weeks we will be considering contributions for the book.

A draft outline of the contents of the book is as follows:

- Introduction
- The way we were
- A brief history
- An advocacy and support breakthrough
- Families Enlist
- Values to fight for
- Peace opportunity lost
- Beyond our borders
- Lobbying
- Keeping the troops informed
- Enlisting allies
- Remembering the fallen
- Heroes
- Peace in our lifetime?
- Debriefing after the battle

More people buying ecstasy, cocaine on internet, Global Drug Survey shows

By David Taylor, ABC News, 8 Jun 2015

More people are buying illicit drugs like ecstasy and cocaine on the internet, as prices are now cheaper online than on the street, a new report shows.

According to the Global Drug Survey 2015, the price of ecstasy pills in Australia is now double the global average, so more people are taking to the net to buy the drug and other substances like it.

But British addiction psychiatrist and survey founder Dr Adam Winstock said the safety and quality online drug stores provide is also attractive to buyers.

“Buying things online gives you product range,” he said.

“I think there is an opportunity of getting improved quality. I think some people would perceive it as safer and certainly a lot of people say it’s safer to buy drugs online. There’s less risk of, you know, getting involved in face to face dealing.”

Dr Winstock said while the shift to online may attract new buyers, it is mostly existing dealers making the move at present.

“What we’re seeing is simply a displacement of people who would otherwise buy drugs on the street,” he said.

According to the survey, Australians are among the biggest users of prescription drugs.

“The Americans remain the world leaders in prescription drug use but Australia’s not far behind,” Dr Winstock said.

But Australians are increasingly misusing prescription opioids, benzodiazepines, and sleeping tablets, Dr Winstock said.

“I think, in part, that’s because other sorts of opiate drugs that are available in Australia are really expensive,” he said.

“That’s the other thing that probably characterises the Australian drug scene more than anything else ... your really expensive drugs.”

Dr Winstock said Australia’s strict border security meant drugs were more expensive because they were harder to get into the country.

“It’s really difficult to get anything into your country,” he said.

But the high drug prices in Australia mean many often choose to buy cheaper alternatives, including crystal methamphetamine, or ice.

“The fact that you’ve got one that’s incredibly dangerous [and] is causing havoc for a lot of people’s mental health and well being is a bit unfortunate,” he said.

“I think the reason Australia will probably be protected from running into serious cocaine problems is because [it costs] about \$350 a gram.

“Most people are probably going to think there’s better ways they can spend their money.”

Third of Australians want to drink less: survey

On a lighter note, while Australia remains one of the top drinking countries in the world, about a third of Australians want to drink less, the survey revealed.

“Certainly I think Aussies drink above their weight [but] about a third of the Australian drinking population that we surveyed wanted to drink less,” Dr Winstock said.

“And of course, the people who filled our survey in from Australia were in their late 30s, professional, educated ... people you kind of would think ... might know better.”

“But actually they’re a bunch of people who are probably really functional and alcohol is part of their life.”

Could users be trusted not to lose control if laws changed?

Global Drug Survey Blog Spot, <http://www.globaldrugsurvey.com/could-users-be-trusted-not-to-lose-control-if-laws-changed/>

First off laws don’t control people. Many people break the law. But smart laws can encourage people to make decisions that are good for them. And governments would be accused that it is just this sort of paternalism that is the driving force behind what many call the ‘failed war on drugs’. Illegal drugs are illegal because they are harmful and international criminalization of drug users is there to protect communities and individuals for their own good.

Well that has been the dominant narrative for decades. As evidence mounts and coherent arguments call for a revision of existing drug laws, GDS2014 (Global Drug Survey 2014) posed a few hypothetical questions to people who had used illegal drugs in the last 12 months to assess what the impact of reduced penalties for the possession of small amounts of drugs might be on their level of drug use and related behaviours. With nearly 80,000 responses from around the world GDS2014 is the biggest study of drug use trends ever.

While advocates of drug law reform argue persuasively that a drug market free from criminalization would reduce individual and wider societal harms there is also the very real possibility that such changes, especially a regulated market, might be associated with an increase in drug use consequent upon easier access and wider availability. One particular concern is that this would not only lead to increased levels of drug use by those already using illicit drugs but would result in increased ‘recruitment’ of drug naïve people (especially younger people) who would otherwise not try drugs.

On a population basis any change in drug laws that led to an increase in the numbers of drug users, would not be popular politically and would not be supported by many advocates for public health. This is made on the reasonable assumption that the more people who use drugs, the more drug users with problems there will be. Actually this might not be the case – what you might end up with is a larger number of people of whom the vast majority not experiencing any real harm at all and a very small number with very significant problems (as we do now) but maybe more effectively supported.

Anyway we have some evidence so let’s not speculate, let’s instead look at the data and see what GDS2014 told us about changes in how drug laws might impact on people’s use of drugs.

We posed 5 different scenarios the results of which are published with our media partners across the world today. Here I will provide a global overview of what the impact would be of just two of policy scenarios on both people who currently use illicit drug and those who do not.

The first scenario we posed was that possession of small

amounts of a drug resulted in no penalty whatsoever. Of about 55,000 last year drug users, 42% reported they would be more likely to disclose their drug use to their use to family and friends with 35% indicating they would be more likely to seek advice/help regarding their use, with only 10% indicating that they might use more drugs or a wider range of drugs. Among the 25,000 or so other respondents who had not used illicit drugs in the previous 12 months, only about 7% indicated they might use more drugs.

The other scenario which I will briefly mention was one where drugs of known purity and quality were available from government controlled outlets. In this scenario 45% of current illicit drug users reported they would be more likely to disclose their drug use to their family and friends with 37% indicating they would be more likely to seek advice/help regarding their use. 15% said they might use more drugs, with 13% reporting they might try a wider range of drugs. 7% of current non-users indicated they might use more drugs.

What does this tell us? I think it says that current drug laws promote stigma and can in of themselves be barriers to help seeking. Aside from criminalization, it would seem that the current drug laws could potentially make drug use more harmful to the individual by removing them from those who are closet and perhaps best placed to help and moderate their use.

There are clearly huge differences between what someone says they will do and what they will actually do. But the current study is at least a start and GDS will track the responses to these questions over the coming years.

The results also highlight the obvious fact that people are impacted upon policies differently.

So what to do? Well Colorado and Washington State are natural experiments as are countries like Portugal. Watching and measuring what happens in these diverse cultures will provide even stronger data for policy makers to consider whether changes are needed and if so whether baby steps are taken first. Either way those in power should feel confident that most people, most of the time will choose things in their lives that makes sense to them and those they care for. When policy matches this 'common' sense we will have got somewhere.

Radio program: "News from the drug war front"

For people living in Canberra and surrounds who can access radio station 2XX the CAHMA radio show "News from the drug war front" is worth listening to. But if you are not living within radio range you can still listen to the show.

This is the only radio show in Australia (and possibly the world) that reports on and debates the damage and harms caused by the prohibition of certain drugs that began on a global scale with the 1961 United Nations Single

Convention on Narcotic Drugs. It aims to expose the failure and moral bankruptcy of the 'war on drugs' or to describe it more accurately, the 'war on people who use drugs'.

In the ACT you can tune in to **2XX, 98.3 FM on Tuesdays from 2-4 pm**. Outside the ACT the show can be streamed to a PC or mobile device using the following link; <http://www.listen.2xxfm.org.au>.

Crime and punishment and rehabilitation: a smarter approach

The on-line newspaper The Conversation is publishing a *Beyond Prison series*, which examines better ways to reduce re-offending, following the recent *State of Imprisonment series*.

In the June 16 edition an article by Andrew Day, Professor of Psychology; Member of the Strategic Research Centre for Social and Early Emotional Development at Deakin University, was published. The article was based on his keynote presentation to the 2015 APS College of Forensic Psychologists Conference in Sydney.

The article in The Conversation begins:

Although criminal justice agencies in Australia have, in recent years, adopted an increasingly "get tough" approach, responses to crime that rely on punishment alone have failed to make our communities safer. Instead, they have produced an expanding prison system. This has the potential to do more harm than good and places considerable strain on government budgets.

Increasing prison sentences does little to deter criminal behaviour. Longer sentences are associated with higher rates of re-offending. When prisoners return to their communities, as the vast majority inevitably do, the problems multiply.

He then covers the following topics:

Exposing the limitations of punishment

Working towards more effective rehabilitation

Essential steps in making corrections policy work

In this latter section he offers four pieces of advice to prison authorities:

First, it is important that low-risk offenders have minimal contact with higher-risk offenders. Extended contact is only likely to increase their risk of recidivism. This has implications for prisoner case management, prison design and for the courts.

Second, concerted efforts are required to develop innovative programmes for those who identify with Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander cultural backgrounds. They are grossly over-represented across all levels of the criminal justice system.

Third, staff need to be properly selected, trained, supervised and resourced to deliver the highest-quality rehabilitation services to the most complex and challenging people.

Finally, it is important to demonstrate that programmes actually make offenders better, not worse.

The full text of the article can be found at theconversation.com and is well worth the read.