

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use

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MEDIA RELEASE

Ceremony remembers a record number of overdose deaths

Contrary to all our hopes and in defiance of all our efforts over the past 22 years to prevent drug users dying, the 22nd annual remembrance ceremony next Monday, 23 October of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform will mark an alarming increase in opiate induced deaths.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics recorded that in 2016 the Australian Capital Territory lost 32 of its own from drug induced deaths.

Nationwide there were 1,808 such deaths to which might be added 1,387 deaths like road accidents where drugs were identified as a contributory cause. For transport deaths, psychotropic substances like meth/amphetamines which alter perception, mood and consciousness were the most common drugs identified on toxicology reports.

This death toll is awful because, in the words of the Bureau: "This is the highest number of drug deaths in twenty years, and is similar to the number recorded in the late 1990s, when a steep increase in opioid use, specifically heroin, led to deaths peaking at 1,740 in 1999."

The situation in Canberra is worse than in other capital cities except Perth. 7.1 people per 100,000 died in capitals. In the ACT the rate last year was 7.9 people.

"This is heart breaking," said Bill Bush, president of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform. "We know how to eliminate drug overdose deaths. Other countries have done so yet politicians bicker and procrastinate about the adoption of measures that will save lives."

"On the basis of their track record," he continued, "we fear governments will be incapable of adjusting policy to cope with the new Australian landscape of drug use."

We are not just dealing with illicit heroin but prescription opioids - "opiate-based analgesics including codeine, oxycodone and morphine, and synthetic opioid prescriptions including tramadol, fentanyl and methadone."

Many of the people now dying have become addicted while seeking relief from chronic pain. Bill Bush observed that this change poses a complex challenge to our political leaders. Clamping down on doctor shopping will drive those who have become addicted to pain medications to source their continuing supply from the criminal black market.

The ABS notes that "In 2016, an individual dying from a drug induced death in Australia was most likely to be a middle aged male, living outside of a capital city who is misusing prescription drugs such as benzodiazepines or oxycodone in a polypharmacy (the use of multiple drugs) setting. The death was most likely to be an accident."

"This profile," the Bureau continued, "is quite different from that in 1999, where a person who died from a drug induced death was most likely to be younger (early 30s) with morphine, heroin or benzodiazepines detected on toxicology at death."

"The drug scene has changed," stressed Bill Bush, "and so must the political response."

This year's ceremony will take place on Monday at lunch time in Weston Park at the memorial rock.

Speakers will be Jo Smith as parent, Meegan Fitzharris, MLA, the ACT Minister for Health and Wellbeing and Pastor Ken Perrin, Ainslie Church of Christ.

Place: Weston Park, Yarralumla, ACT on the right of Weston Park Road opposite the Prescott Lane junction. **Date:** Monday, 23rd October 2017 **Time:** 12:30pm

**For more information: Contact Bill Bush 6257 1786
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