

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

President's Annual Report 2001

Introduction

This is the fourth formal President's report which covers the 12 month period from November 2000 to November 2001.

I would like to thank all those who contributed during the year to the group's activities by writing letters, visiting MPs and others, participating in media events, addressing groups and meetings, assisting with various organised activities, participating and providing support and attending meetings. These activities are the core of what we are about and we are making a difference.

I would like especially to thank my office bearers Bill Bush, vice president, Peter Watney, treasurer, and Josie Barac, secretary. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support. I would like to make special mention of some people:

- Peta Blackford in Queensland, who is working hard to get treatment into Queensland's prisons;
- Jim Bright in Newcastle, who has started a FFDLR group and is working hard to get adequate methadone maintenance in the Newcastle area; and
- Michael Gardiner who is making inroads into talkback radio.

I thank St Ninians Church for the use of their hall.

We appreciate the support of many groups especially APGDLR, ADLRF, ADDInc, ADCA, DRCNET, Drugs in the Family, members of the ACT Department of Health and NCEPH.

It has been a pleasure to have connections with similarly minded groups such as Family Drug Support through Tony Trimmingham in Sydney.

Some events that shaped the year

The year saw a heroin drought extending from December through to the present, although signs of the drought breaking are now evident. As a consequence Australia saw a reduction in overdose deaths but also a large increase in amphetamine and cocaine use that was substituted for heroin. Treatment centres reported greater difficulties because of the lack of effective treatments for amphetamine and cocaine use.

Opportunistically the federal government claimed it had been responsible for the drought with its tough on drugs strategy. A closer analysis indicates that it is more likely be attributed to adverse weather conditions affecting growing, and business decisions taken by organised crime to divert the heroin elsewhere and substitute amphetamines. This latter point was made by AFP Commissioner Mick Keelty.

Support for a heroin trial trended upward, according to opinion polls.

At a joint sitting of both houses of the Victorian Parliament on drugs Neil Comrie claimed "the so called war on drugs is failing to come to grips with the fact that addiction is a health problem":

The National Crime Authority issued a commentary which referred to the damage to society that organised crime syndicates trading in illicit drugs was causing.

The change of government in WA saw that state conduct a drug summit.

Both ACT and federal ALP launched their drug policies.

The ACT government changed to a minority Labor government after the election and one that as a whole is much more likely to be sympathetic to our viewpoint.

The federal government remained a Liberal government after its election.

After the Chamber of Commerce lost its appeal against it, the Kings Cross injecting room opened. The injecting room at the 6 month point had 1500 registered users and had resuscitated 88 persons following overdose, some of whom may not have survived the overdose if it had occurred elsewhere.

The term for members of the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) ended in March. We witnessed the manipulation of membership to one that was more favourably disposed toward the Prime Minister's view. Notably Tony Trimmingham, a supporter of a broader approach, was not reappointed

and in his stead Anne Bressington, a supporter of naltrexone treatment, was appointed. The value of the ANCD has not been enhanced by these changes.

Debra Sands, a member of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform, featured in the ABC's Australian Story.

Membership

FFDLR meetings are held on the 4th Thursday of every month and a newsletter is issued prior to each meeting. Additional information is sent to those for whom we have an email address or to those who ask for it.

Representations

FFDLR is represented on a number of boards and committees, including:

- **The Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA)**. Brian McConnell has recently been accepted to represent on the policy coordination committee. Earlier in the year Judy Aulich was nominated and accepted as a representative on the education committee. Unfortunately the meeting times were not suitable and she had to withdraw from the position.
- **Assisting Drug Dependents Inc (ADDInc)**. Brian McConnell has been again re-elected to that management board.
- **Alcohol and Drug Foundation ACT (ADFACT)**. Brian McConnell is the Attorney General's representative on that management board.
- **ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS)**. FFDLR is a member of that organisation and Bill Bush and Bronwyn Barnard were our representatives on the Prison Committee.
- **Crime Prevention Committee**. Bill Bush represents FFDLR on this ACT government committee. Bill also chaired an early intervention working group.
- **ACT Division of General Practice Advisory Committee**. John Ley has been accepted to represent FFDLR on this committee.

During the year FFDLR made representations to or met with:

- Bob McMullan MP, member for Fraser;
- John Murray, newly appointed ACT Chief Police Officer;
- ACT Community Care Alcohol and Drug Program;
- Michael Moore MLA, then Health Minister;
- Gary Humphries MLA, then Chief Minister;
- Jon Stanhope MLA, then Opposition Leader;
- Brendan Smyth MLA, then deputy Chief Minister;
- Kerrie Tucker MLA;
- Jacqui Bourke, then MLA;
- Ben Oquist, advisor to Bob Brown MP;
- Wayne Severs, Secretary Australian Democrats.

Submissions

In the year 2000 Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform made representations to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Drug Abuse. This year FFDLR and individual members of the organisation were invited to contribute further to this inquiry.

The federal government Intergovernmental Committee on Drugs invited us to submit two futures scenarios relating to the family 10 – 20 years into the future. The first scenario related to what could be expected if nothing changed. The second presented an ideal outcome if identified aspects changed. In addition Brian and Marion were invited to participate in a Futures Prevention Workshop held in Adelaide, to discuss those and other future scenarios.

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform made a submission to the WA drug summit.

Bill Bush provided a commentary paper on the ACT Bail Act for the ACTCOSS prisons committee.

Conferences and Seminars

Last year's annual report contained details about the National Families and Community Conference on Drugs that was jointly run by Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform and Family Drug Support. The work that followed from that conference continued this year with the finalising of administrative details and the preparation and publishing of the conference proceedings. All participants have received a copy of the proceedings and so too have all major libraries in Australia.

Brian and Marion attended the 2nd International Conference on Young People and Drugs in Melbourne in April.

Bill Bush presented a paper on implementation of Australia's drug policy at the University of Canberra seminar on the Implementation of Public Policy Theory and Practice Issues.

Brian participated in viewing and then panel discussion of the movie "Traffic" that was held in South-West Sydney. The forum was organised by Family Drug Support.

John Ley attended ADCA's policy seminar.

Awareness raising activities

Talks at FFDLR meetings

The following people were guest speakers at FFDLR meetings:

- David Moses a pharmacist spoke of his experiences in methadone dispensing under the community program;
- Wendy O'Mara on a return visit to Australia, spoke of her experiences in Great Britain about getting her daughter on the prescribed diacetyl-morphine program;
- Angella Brown from Victims of Crime Assistance League spoke about her organisation;
- Gosta Linga, former member of the Greens, Sweden, spoke of his knowledge of the Swedish drug control program;
- Rolf Ericsson from the Swedish Embassy described the Swedish drug control system;
- Michael Tedeschi a GP from the drug and alcohol field spoke about current pharmacotherapy treatments;
- Marion & Brian spoke at a Newcastle meeting of FFDLR and Jim Bright has organised and spoken at others.

Additionally FFDLR members have worked hard this year at raising the organisation's profile with community organisations, most significantly ACTCOSS.

Several students have requested personal interviews on drug law reform issues and several students have contacted us through email and our website seeking information. We satisfied the needs of the students.

Talks by FFDLR

Brian McConnell and Bill Bush spoke at a Victims of Crime Assistance League meeting.

Marion and Brian were keynote speakers at a conference organised by the Central Western General Practice Association in Orange.

Marion and Brian presented a session to students of a Certificate course in Community Services offered by TRAHCS & CET.

Public Meetings

A public meeting was held during Drug Action Week 25 – 29 June. The meeting was well attended and was entitled "Drugs affect all sectors of the community". The meeting heard from speakers from sectors of the community that one would not normally expect to be affected by drugs, but whom, the meeting heard, had been very much affected. The meeting was sponsored and chaired by Kerrie Tucker MLA.

Newcastle Meetings – Jim Bright, a Newcastle member, organised a number of public meetings in Charlestown, a suburb of Newcastle. As mentioned earlier Marion and Brian attended one of the meetings.

We again participated in ACT Alive.

Media activities

A strong media and lobbying campaign was conducted against the proposed ACT referendum on injecting rooms and heroin trials which was to be undertaken in conjunction with the ACT election. A paper entitled 10 reasons not to have a referendum was prepared for the occasion. Bill Bush had published an opinion article published in the Canberra Times. Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform's major concern was that it was wrong in principle for a democratically elected government without regard to the evidence and to abrogate its decision making responsibility in this issue and submit such an important issue to a popular vote. The net effect would have resulted in a non binding plebiscite. The proposal was defeated in the Assembly and did not go to referendum.

Again the year saw many letters to the editor from Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform members.

Two opinion pieces from Brian were published in the Canberra Times: the first related to the heroin drought and the second related to the ANCD.

Bill Bush had a commentary on international drug treaties published in an international journal edited by Prof Ernie Drucker.

Peter Watney had an article entitled "Prohibitory laws are different to ordinary laws" published in the bimonthly international journal International Coalition of NGOs for Just and Effective Drug Policies.

The following media releases were issued during the year:

- Drugs: moral failure by Australia's political leadership
- PM puts his ideological stamp on the ANCD
- ACT crime prevention strategy: avoiding the "bleedin" obvious
- PM rejection of NCA evidence frightening
- Remembrance ceremony release.

Throughout the year we have been contacted by media to make comment on topical drug news.

Members' information

An "Activists election kit" was revised, produced and issued to all members during the year. This was in preparation for the up-coming elections.

Two short papers were prepared estimating "how much heroin" and "how much amphetamine" there was on the street in 1999. The National Crime Authority at a later stage also estimated a figure for heroin, confirming FFDLR's figure.

A paper entitled "Current Illicit Drug Strategies – Costs and Consequences" was prepared. Its purpose was to assist with discussions about the costs of current drug strategies. It is at this stage a work in progress paper.

Peta Blackford prepared a discussion paper on sentencing in prisons which was published in our newsletter.

Peter Watney prepared a paper on prohibition laws which was published in our newsletter.

Our charter was revised during the year to bring it up to date.

Remembrance ceremony

A sixth annual remembrance ceremony was held this year. Speakers included Donald Denoon, Annette Ellis MP and Lama Rigzin, a Buddhist Monk. Over 100 people attended. There was good media coverage.

Other matters

FFDLR assisted with organisation of training programs for Family Drug Support telephone volunteers. Two such training programs were conducted by Tony Trimmingham of FDS during the year. A number of FFDLR members are volunteers on the FDS telephone line.

Brian McConnell
President