

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

President's Annual Report 2002

Introduction

This is the fifth formal President's report which covers the 12 month period from November 2001 to November 2002. Members continued to meet monthly throughout 2002 except for the month of December and January.

I would like to thank all those who contributed during the year to the group's activities by writing letters, writing submissions, 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 Pat Varga, secretary. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support and Anne Edgeworth for her expertise in recording a number of our events.

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 for FFDLR started after the federal elections which saw the return of the Howard Government. We still had to battle against a government that opposes the life saving treatment of heroin prescription trials and supervised injecting places. The meagre trickle of funds to treatment compared to the gush of funds to law enforcement was set to be repeated.

The same government proceeded during the year to dismantle the National Crime Authority, which among other things had dared to say, to any who would listen, that the war against organised crime, which was fuelled largely by the drug trade, was being lost and perhaps the government should make heroin available on prescription. A less independent organisation that can be controlled by law enforcement and governments is being established.

However on the world stage positive changes were occurring – for example reductions in criminality of laws in respect of cannabis in Great Britain and Canada. In Great Britain reports of trials in certain areas whereby police did not apprehend cannabis users indicated reductions in other crimes. Possibly because police were investigating serious crimes instead.

Germany reported during the year significant savings in lives as a result of their introduction of supervised injecting rooms. And the Dutch concluded their heroin prescription trials and declared it a great success on many fronts, but mainly demonstrating that it could improve treatment by up to 25% over their methadone maintenance program. Its success was little reported in Australia and no comment was made about it by the federal government.

There were many progress reports on the Kings Cross Medically Supervised Injecting Room and all reports demonstrated very good outcomes. The International Narcotics Control Board (INCB) demanded that Australia close the injecting room but few took any notice of their demands.

Much was made in the election campaign about the heroin drought – the government wrongly claimed that its 'Tough on Drugs Strategy' was responsible for it. However an examination of the public record revealed that the heroin drought was mostly the result of increased demand for heroin elsewhere and shortages of supply. It also revealed that Asian crime gangs manufactured amphetamines and promoted their use in Australia because it was more profitable. Much of this was on the public record and predicted months before the heroin drought struck Australia.

An outcome was a high usage of amphetamines but because treatment services were unaware that the drug was on its way treatment services were unprepared.

However with the Taliban removed from Afghanistan and improved weather conditions in South East Asia heroin production started to rise. It was predicted that Afghanistan would have a bumper spring crop - the heroin from it would be reaching markets about now. In Australia heroin is returning to the streets.

The ACT government continued to reiterate during the year its support for a heroin trial and for a supervised injecting room trial. The SIP taskforce was re-established and is continuing its work but the final outcome of the Kings Cross injecting room trial is being awaited before the next step is taken. A joint community and government drugs taskforce has been established and the doctors Division of General Practice has established the Opiate Program, a program to assist GPs with treatment of opiate addiction.

However the debate on drug law reform has taken second place to terrorism issues.

Representations

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

- **The Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA).** Member
- **Assisting Drug Dependents Inc (ADDInc).** Brian McConnell has been re-elected to the management board.
- **Alcohol and Drug Foundation ACT (ADFACT).** Brian McConnell is the Attorney General's representative on the management board.
- **ACT Council of Social Services (ACTCOSS).** FFDLR is a member of this organisation and Bill Bush and Bronwyn Barnard are our representatives on their 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 represents FFDLR on this committee.
- **Chief Minister's Drugs Taskforce.** Brian represents FFDLR on this taskforce.
- **ACT Health Summit.** Brian and Marion represent FFDLR on this summit.

During the year FFDLR made representations to or met with:

- Chief Minister Jon Stanhope MLA, Katie Gallagher MLA, Karin McDonald MLA, Roslyn Dundas MLA, Brendan Smyth MLA, Kerrie Tucker MLA, adviser to Ted Quinlan MLA, Peter Andren MP, Darryl Mellon MP, Tanya Plibersek MP, Harry Quick MP, Jenny George MP, Senators McGuirin, Greg and Lees.
- Specific mention needs to be made of a letter that was written to Senator Ellison in response to a letter to the editor he had written to the Canberra Times. Our letter was not responded to, despite follow-up correspondence until we wrote to our local member Bob McMullan MP. A response (which incidentally did not answer the matters we raised) came within a week. Our thanks to Bob McMullan for getting some action.

Submissions

In the year Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform made further representations to the House of Representatives Inquiry into Drug Abuse. That committee produced an interim report and expects to produce its final report early in 2003.

Submissions were made also to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the National Crime Authority and the inquiry into Crime in the Community by the House of Reps Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. Bill Bush was responsible for the significant work involved in preparation of these submissions. Additionally an oral presentation by Bill and Brian was made to the NCA Inquiry.

Conferences and Seminars

Bill Bush attended and presented a paper entitled "Illicit drug use in the intergenerational cycle: Must things always go from bad to worse?" at the APSAD conference in November 2002.

Awareness raising activities

Our two major awareness raising activities were a forum for Drug Action Week and the 7th Annual Remembrance Ceremony. The forum was entitled Law Justice & Drugs and speakers were Richard Refshauge, Director of Public Prosecutions; David McDonald, Public Health and Criminology Researcher at NCEPH; John Murray, ACT Chief Police Officer; and Joost Dirkswager, Counsellor from the Royal Netherlands Embassy. Our Remembrance Ceremony had a specific focus on the relation between drugs and mental health. Speakers at the ceremony were Anne Deveson, who is the author of the best selling book about the impact of schizophrenia on family life – *Tell Me I'm Here*, Rev'd Gray Birch and Brendan Smyth (MLA). Details of the program are posted on our website and copies of the speeches are also being posted as they become available. At this time speeches from Gray Birch and Brendan Smyth have been posted.

Talks at FFDLR meetings

The following people were guest speakers at FFDLR meetings:

- ◆ Kylie Lawson, Illicit Drug Diversion Officer (ACT Police) and Glenda McCarthy, Manager Diversion Services (Alcohol and Drug Program)
- ◆ Jennifer Saunders of Saunders & Company, Solicitors and Attorneys (Criminal Law Specialists)
- ◆ Sally Pink and Bruce Munro from the ACT Community Care Alcohol and Drug Program
- ◆ Michelle Tziarkas Acting Chief Executive officer of 'Directions'.

Other activities

We again participated in 'ACT Alive', a community 'show and tell' event.

The revision of 'Frequently Asked Questions' was undertaken by Brock Bryce and Peter Watney.

A number of letters to the editor were written by members.

Letters were written challenging some newspaper reports. These were written to local councils or directly to the newspaper.

A number of opinion pieces were written for newspapers. The following were published:

- ◆ Zero tolerance is not an effective solution, Geoff Page, Canberra Times 29/1/2002
- ◆ Clean society an admirable but unrealistic goal, Brian McConnell, Canberra Times 25/2/2002
- ◆ Winning the headlines but losing the war, Brian McConnell, Canberra Times 8/4/2002
- ◆ Opinion article on the answerability of Australian Federal Police to the ACT Government: Our ACT Police: who calls the shots?, Bill Bush, Canberra Times (14/5/2002)
- ◆ Book review in Canberra Times by Bill Bush of McAllister, Drug diplomacy in the twentieth century and Central Asia: Drugs and Conflict by the International Cris Group
- ◆ Book Review in Canberra Times by Geoff Page of Reilly, Pauline, Cannabis & Cancer
- ◆ "A misdirected crusade?" - reflections on Bewley-Taylor, The American crusade: the internationalization of drug prohibition in Addiction research 2002 (in press)

Circulated articles issued as pamphlets by Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform:

"The Australian heroin drought: the case for an inquiry into its causes and the flood of methamphetamines" 28pp (February 2002)

"The waning of clear thinking in decision making: the case of the heroin trial and the effect of law enforcement on the supply of drugs" (23pp) (February 2002)

Brian was invited and attended the AMA Drug Summit on 11 April. The focus of this summit was "party drugs".

In addition we continue to network and build coalitions with other agencies.

Our web page at www.ffdlr.org.au has been updated during the year and provides a great deal of information. All recent newsletters are published there as well as articles from members and others. The site also contains transcripts of a number of speakers from our public forums.

Talks by FFDLR

Brian organised and presented a five week course at the University of the Third Age entitled "The war on drugs but what about the casualties". Speakers at this course included Bill Bush, Ralph Seccombe, Marion McConnell and Michael Moore.

Marion and Brian spoke at Jamison Probus and Brian spoke at the Canberra Institute of Technology community development course as well as a seminar of the Opiate Program.

Media activities

Media activities included a number of radio and television appearances. Most significant were the Sunday forum panel discussion chaired by Father Paul Collins and Marion and Bill in interview with Jim Wallace on Christian Radio, 1WAYFM.

Media releases included:

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| 3 February 2002 | Call for Judicial Inquiry into Causes of Heroin Drought and Methamphetamine Flood |
| 7 February 2002 | Dutch trial of prescription heroin strongly endorses benefits |
| 10 August 2002 | NCA Independence Gone: National Crime Authority brought to heel |
| 4 November 2002 | Anne Deveson to speak of drug use and mental illness |

Other

FFDLR gained a student from the University of Canberra Community Education course to observe and help with a small project. The project chosen relates to cannabis policies of selected countries and the relationship between those policies and cannabis use.

Brian McConnell
President

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