

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

President's Annual Report 2003

Introduction

This is the sixth formal President's report which covers the 12 month period from November 2002 to November 2003. Members continued to meet monthly throughout 2003 except for the months 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 having an impact.

I would like especially to thank my office bearers John Ley, vice president; Peter Watney, treasurer; and Cynthia Groundwater, who agreed to undertake the task of secretary part way through the year. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support, Anne Edgeworth for her expertise in recording a number of our events and St Ninians Church for the use of its hall. In addition some excellent work has been undertaken for Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform by Bill Bush and I thank him for his tireless efforts.

Interstate the efforts of Jan Steel in WA and of Jim Bright in the NSW Hunter valley area are also to be recognised.

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

Events of significance

The year 2003 was a significant year in that it was 50 years since heroin was prohibited in Australia. An extract from reports from that year has been posted on our website. A great deal of material was collected to mark this event, some of which has been published. A package of material has been sent to media outlets trying to stir their interest. At the time of writing this report we are organising for Desmond Manderson, an historian with significant knowledge of the history of prohibition in Australia, to speak at a public forum.

SIP (Supervised Injecting Place): The Kings Cross Medically Supervised Injecting Place trial concluded and a report of the trial was published in May 2003. As a result that trial has been extended for another four years. In the ACT the incoming government undertook to establish a SIP subject to the outcomes of the Sydney MSIC. At time of writing no decision had been taken. Canada, during the year established its first supervised injecting centre. This was the first on the American continent.

Centenary of Federation Medals were awarded to Brian and Marion McConnell. The medals were awarded for services to Drug Law Reform through Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform and reflect as much as anything on the work and support of key FFDLR members.

Involvement in the community or other like groups

The Opiate Program – ACT: John Ley is FFDLR's representative on this committee.

Crime Prevention Committee: Bill Bush is FFDLR's representative on this committee.

ACT Drugs Task Force: Brian McConnell is FFDLR's representative on this taskforce. Its work concluded on 21 October and the outcome has been the production of a new ACT drug strategy.

DIRECTIONS: Brian McConnell is a member of the Board of this drug user support service agency.

ADFACT: Brian McConnell's membership to the board of this residential rehabilitation service agency concluded this year. Brian was a ministerial appointment to the board.

ACTCOSS Corrections Coalition: Bill Bush is FFDLR's representative in this coalition.

Representations

Many representations were made to a number of members of parliament both local in the ACT and at the federal representatives and senate levels . In many cases FFDLR assisted MPs by the provision of relevant material and/or suggestions about how the harm from illicit drugs could be reduced or how further relevant information might be obtained. Some political parties also sought advice from FFDLR on drug policies they were developing.

Representations were made to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family & Community Affairs Inquiry into Drug Abuse in Australia to which Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform had made submissions. The report was tabled on 7th September 2003. In relation to illicit drugs it was a very disappointing report, lacking any substantive evidence base for its recommendations.

Submissions

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform made submissions as follows:

Inquiry into support services for families of people in custody by the Standing Committee on Community Services and Social Equity of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Sentencing Review - Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform's response to the ACT Government's Issues Paper which called for comment.

Inquiry into Crime in the Community: Victims, Offenders, and Fear of crime by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs. This submission addresses the relationship between illicit drugs and those crimes that closely affect the community.

FFDLR is much indebted to Bill Bush for the very comprehensive submissions. Copies of all submissions can be found on our website.

Conferences and Seminars

Brian McConnell and Peter Watney attended a public seminar on "Drug Markets and Criminal Networks – some implications for criminal justice. The speaker, English professor Geoff Pearson had been invited by the Institute of Criminology to speak. His study, based on interviews of 50 prisoners, 50 police and members of NCIS, was aimed at reaching an understanding of the middle market in the drug trade.

Bill Bush attended the APSAD 2002 November conference in Adelaide, SA, at which he presented a paper about the need for a holistic approach to dealing with drug issues.

In January 2003 Brian and Marion McConnell and Bill Bush were invited to attend the Democrats annual conference that was held in Sydney.

Marion McConnell spoke at a Family Drug Support Drug Action Week event. FFDLR also had a stall set up at the venue which attracted significant attention.

Many members in the ACT attended a community consultation forum aimed at assisting the production of the ACT Drug Strategy which was being produced by the Drug and Alcohol Taskforce.

Awareness raising activities

Talks at FFDLR meetings

November 2002: Ann Symonds, Patron of the Mothers' and Childrens' Committee for the NSW Department of Corrective Services; **Imprisonment of drug offenders and its impact on children.**

March 2003: Jamie Koolamatangi, Illicit Drug Diversion Officer AFP and Glenda McCarthy Diversion Services Unit, ACT Community Care; **Update on Drug Diversion ACT.**

May 2003: David McDonald, a Social Scientist with research interests; **Thinking about drug policy.**

August 2003: John Brudenall; **The Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia.**

September 2003: Dr Ingrid van Beek, Medical Director of the Kings Cross Medically Supervised Injecting Centre; **Report on the Sydney Medically Supervised Injecting Centre.**

Talks by FFDLR members

Bill Bush addressed the Community Forum, "Society's Treatment of Drug Users" Brunswick Street Mall Rotunda, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane Thursday, 26 June 2003 as part of Drug Action Week. His talk was entitled: Zero Tolerance in a Modern Community: how to recognise the zealot.

Brian McConnell participated in a debate on "legal vs illegal drugs" at Canberra High School

Remembrance Ceremony

The 8th Annual Remembrance Ceremony was held on 27th October 2003. Speakers were Bishop George Browning, Bob McMullan MP and Marion McConnell. The choir was "a Chorus of Women". A larger than normal attendance of about 150 people attended.

Transcripts of the talks can be found on the website.

Published articles

Many Questions Unanswered in Drug Report Expert. Evidence contradicts some of its conclusions, writes Bill Bush. Published in the Canberra Times Monday September 22, 2003 page 11.

Enlightened minds needed to solve the drugs dilemma. Bill Bush says the highly charged moral and political atmosphere surrounding drugs challenges the choice of the best interventions. Drugs constitute the greatest social issue facing the nation. This is the verdict of Peter Costello, the thwarted Liberal leader in the Press last week. They are "every parent's nightmare", he added. In contrast, the ACT Police believe that "the scoreboard is starting to show some runs" (The Canberra Times, May 24). There's nothing like a few big seizures to buoy spirits. Published in the Canberra Times 10 June 2003

One policy Australia cannot afford to abandon. Prime Minister Howard is opposed to it. Bronwyn Bishop says that it is dead. Bureaucrats have tried to define it away. Philip Emafo, President of the International Narcotics Control Board says it is a distraction from ridding the world of drugs. But harm minimisation is far from dead says Brian McConnell. Published in the Canberra Times.

Thinking about drugs policy: Some core concepts that might underpin the next stage of Australia's National Drug Strategy. This is a PowerPoint presentation by David McDonald, Consultant in Social Research & Evaluation, was made to the Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform meeting at Canberra on 22 May 2003 and is published on the Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform website.

FFDLR media activities

There have been a number of appearances on television news media, radio and statements reported in newspapers by members of FFDLR. Some have been as a result of media releases while a reasonable number were as a result of events that the media wished to report upon. FFDLR's media releases are listed below.

26 October 2003	Drug Deaths to be Remembered
15 October 2003	ACT Prison Inquiry - Prisons Damage Families
8 September 2003	Inquiry a litany of lost opportunities
23 April 2003	Reality check needed on latest drug bust
4 November 2002	Anne Deveson to speak of drug use and mental illness

Other awareness raising activities

The distribution via email of complimentary FFDLR Newsletters to all federal, state and territory members of parliament was undertaken during the year. This has continued each month. The matter arose from a suggestion of one of our members. The issues of complimentary newsletters have been well received with many favourable comments and notes of appreciation from the members of parliament.

We have assisted a number of undergraduate university students with assignments and projects relating to drugs.

Brian McConnell
President

