



# Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) Inc.

*committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use*

## December Newsletter 2015

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A huge amount has happened since Brian issued the November newsletter so we have put together another letter to mark the end of 2015 - Hello and Seasons Greetings!

A very enjoyable dinner followed by the AGM was held at Bill and Mary Bush's on the 25th of November. A new committee was elected as follows:

- President – Peter Taylor
- Vice President – Bill Bush
- Treasurer – Bob McFadden
- Secretary (and public officer)– Cynthia Groundwater
- Committee Members - Fiona Brand, John Ley, Marion McConnell and Joan Westaway.

Heartfelt thanks were expressed at the AGM to Brian and Marion for their huge effort in developing FFDLR, their ongoing commitment to the cause of drug law reform, and monumental success in the publication of the Drug Law Wars book this year.

To introduce ourselves, some words from Peter (and Bill below):

I have been involved with FFDLR since 2011 when my son overdosed on heroin. Had civil society been managing such a dangerous substance, rather than criminal elements, I believe he would have been alive today. I hope that my involvement now with FFDLR will lead to a change in the laws and will help to maintain our commitment to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use.

It struck me the other day that being a member of FFDLR is not something that one wants to be. It is

not on the same level as joining a bridge club for example. Joining FFDLR is often born out of great pain, or passionate frustration with the inhumanity of our culture. However, I took great heart today when the Canberra Times reported that Sir Richard Branson in a personal submission to the National ICE taskforce had challenged the Prime Minister to decriminalise illicit drugs<sup>1</sup>. There are great changes afoot and we are not alone.

Enough from me – here are a few words from Bill

2015 has seen the end of an era for Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform. Brian's serious health problems have compelled him to decide not to stand for re-election as president and thus step back from his leadership of our group. It will also do a little to constrain Marion's involvement in the cause. For me and for the community at large, drug law reform has always been identified with Brian and Marion who have had the courage to transform their grief into tireless advancement of justice and the application of the enlightenment value of evidence as the core guide for the development of public policy. When they first embarked on this path 20 years ago, drug law reform was an alien and unpopular subject unfit for discussion around the dinner table. In a large part thanks to them, that has changed. At the launch of Harm Reduction Australia, Tony Trimmingham singled out his first meeting with Brian at a public meeting in Sydney as one of the seminal

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/3562565/richard-branson-calls-on-australian-prime-minister-malcolm-turnbull-to-decriminalise-drugs/?cs=7>

When anyone takes action to attempt to make something happen, that something becomes more likely

influences that convinced him of the need for drug law reform and moved him to establish a Family Drug Support phone service in 1997 to fill the yawning gap that he experienced when his own son died after becoming dependent upon heroin. Never before FFDLR had families advocated for the removal of criminal sanctions on drug users and the treatment of drugs as fundamentally a health issue rather than pressing for ever more intense law enforcement effort.

Their prophetic voice has also been an influence internationally through international harm reduction conferences at which they spoke. Their influence over the years has had a particularly strong influence in moderating the tone of the public discourse about drug policy in the ACT.

It is a sad irony that Brian's health is causing him and Marion to slightly relax their efforts now.

There are many signs that the drug policy debate is at a tipping point: the international drug control regime is at the point of crumbling with many countries in Europe and the Americas moving from a hard law enforcement approach. Indeed, the forthcoming United Nations Special General Assembly on drugs which will take place in April 2016 may well signal "goal achieved" for Families and Friends. That would enable Brian and Marion to savour victory!

### **Planning for next year and buying the book**

We will have our first meeting for the New Year on the fourth Thursday in February – (25th) – at the meeting hall of the St Ninian's Uniting Church in Lyneham where Families has met since the early days. We would love to see as many members as we can so that we can develop strategies to meet the FFDLR charter (see website). If you cannot attend please feel free to contact any of the committee members with ideas or offers of help and support!

The book shows the power of FFDLR. It provides great insight into the problem we are dealing with.

"The war on drugs has killed hundreds of thousands of people across the world. Nobody knows that better than the authors of this book. Criminalization makes drugs much more deadly,

and punishment makes addiction radically worse. If you want to understand the heart of this pain - and the urgent need to pursue the alternatives, which have been proven to work - read this book." Johann Hari, author of Chasing the Scream

Do buy a copy of the book.

Peter and Bill

### **Purchasing a book**

Copies of the Drug Law Wars book are available through the website [ffdlr.org.au](http://ffdlr.org.au) by downloading a simple order form and attaching it to an email to the treasurer, Bob McFadden ([treasurer@ffdlr.org.au](mailto:treasurer@ffdlr.org.au)).

Payment can be made by direct credit to FFDLR's account, details of which, together with Bob's email, are on the order form.

OR you can post the order form with cheque to FFDLR,

PO Box 7186, KALEEN 2617 and a book will be posted to you.

Cost of the book is \$25 + postage of \$2.

### **Reports of Activities**

There have been quite a few activities to report as described below.

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## **Radio interviews**

Marion was interviewed by Alex Sloan on her Canberra Closeup program at ABC 666 on the 25th of November and Marion and Brian were both interviewed by Genevieve Jacobs on the Morning Show of the 8th of December. Unfortunately neither of these shows are available on the ABC website.

Peter and Bill were interviewed by Doris Kordes on the 2XXfm program Opening Minds sponsored by MIEACT (Mental Illness Education ACT) on the 10th of November.

## **BOOK LAUNCH - 18 November, 2015**

The Drug Law Wars: Twenty years of families fight at the front

The launch of FFDLR's book to commemorate its twenty years of activity was a memorable occasion. Friendships of original members of FFDLR were renewed and experiences recalled. The Reception Room at the ACT Legislative Assembly was brimming with conversation from all sectors of the community as a large number of participants enjoyed the refreshments and the strumming of the ukele by Alison Oakleigh before the official proceedings began. The display of books was attractively set up by members of ATODA and the books were selling well.

Carrie Fowlie, CEO of the Alcohol, Tobacco and Other Drugs Association, welcomed the audience and introduced Senator Katy Gallagher to launch the book.



*Senator Katy Gallagher with Marion and Brian at the book launch.*

Katy began her speech with the following perceptive words:

For anyone who wants to understand the history, development and implementation of Australia's drug laws this is the book for you.

For anyone who wants to understand the human cost and the personal stories of lives lost and families left heartbroken this is the book for you.

For anyone who wants to understand other alternatives to standard drug policy and laws this is the book for you.

Katy went on to say

'Drug Law Wars' chronicles the earliest days of a community led movement - from the days before Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform to the forming of the organisation, to the development and expansion of the families led model - not just across Australia but to other parts of the world. It's a history that has been shaped by the dedication, perseverance, eternal optimism and sheer persistence of a small group of individuals who managed against the odds to spread an alternate message to the one commonly understood across the community.

Katy's speech was not the typical political speech one often hears on such occasions but a very human response to the hopes and despair of a community organisation that had been trying to bring change in a difficult area.

Whilst the book examines in honest detail the gains made it also looks at the losses as well. Although on my reading of the book – these can't be seen as losses – sure the ultimate goal wasn't realised in every case – safe injecting room, heroin trial stand out as examples here – it is clear that every campaign, won or lost, continued to progress the principles of the organisation – through fierce advocacy and evidence based arguments – calm, considered and rational arguments at that – understanding and awareness of Australia's drug policies, the needs and rights of users and the needs and rights of families were enhanced.

Following is part of Marion and Brian McConnell's response.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think that when

When anyone takes action to attempt to make something happen, that something becomes more likely

this group began back in 1995 following the tragic loss of so many young lives would we be here today, 20 years later still advocating for change to our drug laws. The book tells of what has been for many of us a long unrelenting battle, a battle that I believe has proved to be one of the hardest if not the hardest social justice issue on which to make traction. Difficult issues like abortion and gay rights have made progress over time, issues like poverty and homelessness whilst by no means stabilised at least are broadly discussed and debated.

Drug Law Reform is not the taboo subject that it was in 1995 but even though drugs are implicated in many of the most costly social issues it is still difficult to get political parties to openly discuss the full scope of the research and evidence that advocates a move away from prohibition. I hope this book gives them not only the courage to do so but gives them very good reasons why it is essential that they do so.

Many of us lost our family members because the drugs they received were unregulated and uncontrolled. We want drugs to be less available to our kids but if they are going to use drugs we want them to live through the experience without adverse health consequences. This would be more likely if drugs were treated as a health and social issue and not a law enforcement one and drugs were controlled and regulated by governments. As Johann Hari said “Criminalisation makes drugs much more deadly, and punishment

We are at a tipping point. Change is imminent. Even the Office at the United Nations has just this month put out a report - What comes after the war on drugs the introduction of which says “In April 2016, diplomats, experts and civil society actors from around the world will gather for three days at a rare Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, called to address the world drug problem (UNGASS 2016). This gathering reflects a growing sense in some quarters, particularly in the Western Hemisphere, that the so-called ‘War on Drugs’ has failed, and that global drug policy needs rethinking.” This coming from a United Nations that in 1998 declared the world would be drug free by 2008.

Our personal hope is that the launch and reading of this book will help all of us, all of you to understand

that the ‘War on Drugs’ is a war on our young people and real peace offerings need to begin

.....

The title of the book is styled on a war theme. It is a symbolic twist on US President Nixon’s War on Drugs and is presented as a series of themes rather than a chronological record. FFDLR has been engaged in a fight for better drug laws and better drug policies, not unlike any world conflict, not unlike any war. The symbolism of the front cover artwork will also become clear when the chapter, Remembering the fallen has been read.

## **ICE AGE ACTIVITY**

### **National Ice Taskforce**

On Sunday 6 December 2015, the Australian Government released the Final Report of the National Ice Taskforce that reported to the Prime Minister on 9 October. The report is available at [https://www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/national\\_ice\\_taskforce\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/national_ice_taskforce_final_report.pdf). The Task force was chaired by Ken Lay, the Chief Commissioner of Victoria Police from 2011 to 2015. The Taskforce has made 38 recommendations across five areas of priority.

1. The first priority must be supporting families, workers and communities to better respond to people affected by ice.
2. Efforts to reduce demand for ice through prevention activities must be strengthened.
3. Ice users need treatment and support services that cater to their needs.
4. Efforts to disrupt supply must be more coordinated and targeted.
5. Better data, more research and regular reporting is needed to strengthen Australia’s response and keep it on track.

### **Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement**

On a separate track the Joint Committee on Law Enforcement was also given a reference to report on Ice to both houses of parliament. Families and Friends made a submission to this inquiry in June this year and was invited to appear before it on 25

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November. As a Joint Committee it is made up of members from both the Senate and the House of Representatives as well as from different parties. It is chaired by Mr Craig Kelly MP, Liberal Party of Australia , Hughes NSW. Its deputy chair is Senator the Hon. Lisa Singh, Australian Labor Party , TAS and its members are Senator Sean Edwards Liberal Party of Australia , SA; Mr Chris Hayes MP Australian Labor Party , Fowler NSW; Senator the Hon. David Johnston Liberal Party of Australia , WA; Senator Chris Ketter, Australian Labor Party , QLD; Senator David Leyonhjelm, Liberal Democratic Party , NSW; Mr Russell Matheson MP, Liberal Party of Australia , Macarthur NSW, Ms Maria Vamvakinou MP, Australian Labor Party, Calwell VIC; and Mr Jason Wood MP, Liberal Party of Australia , La Trobe VIC

Bill and I attended the hearing of the Ice Joint Committee on the 25th of November to talk to our submission and answer questions. We felt that the members of the committee were very keen to hear our viewpoint despite it being markedly different from other submissions. They were clearly engaged with our personal experiences. They asked the hard questions but advised this was in the role of devil's advocate. Fair enough given public perceptions whipped up by media. At the hearing we tabled the following opening statement that stressed the futility of ramping up ever more and more drug law enforcement. If DLE is now to be more "coordinated and targeted" as the government has said it will be, what was it up to now? (The full version of the submission is available at [http://ffdlr.org.au/submissions/docs/Sub%2071\\_Families%20and%20Friends%20for%20Drug%20Law%20Reform.pdf](http://ffdlr.org.au/submissions/docs/Sub%2071_Families%20and%20Friends%20for%20Drug%20Law%20Reform.pdf))

### ***Opening Statement from FFDLR***

We are grateful to the committee for receiving our submission on this important subject and for the opportunity today to appear before you in person to answer any questions that you may have arising from it.

Families and Friends came into being. 20 years ago. It was established around a group of parents and

brothers and sisters who experienced the grief of losing a family member who had been using drugs. It was born of the conviction that while the drugs concerned were dangerous and were the last things that we wanted our family member to get caught up with, we were convinced that their death would not have occurred had other different drug policies prevailed. This conviction has only been confirmed by the research, experience of other countries and what we have learnt since that time.

Families and Friends holds to the view that the starting point of any consideration of drug policy must be a realistic appreciation of the economic realities involved. You are considering one aspect of an enormous global business that the United Nations Drugs and Crime Organisation (UNODC) estimated in 2005 was worth about \$322 billion per year. This puts it on a par with the petroleum and arms industries. Work commissioned by the Bureau of Statistics in 2012 estimated that Australia's share of this illicit trade was worth \$7.6 billion of which amphetamines represented \$1.2 billion.

Why has this trade so thrived?

Firstly, the direct peer-to-peer marketing system at the heart of the retail trade is extraordinarily effective;

Secondly, that trade is virtually immune from any significant level of penetration by law enforcement;

Thirdly: Based upon the most recent data, the deterrent effect of law enforcement is minimal – less than a 2% chance of a user ever being caught;

Fourthly: There is an endless supply of middle level dealers who are prepared to run the risk of apprehension in return for the high profits. Some years ago I heard that young distributors of methamphetamine can make in the region of \$30,000 per month

Fifthly: Drug law enforcement (DLE) thus fails the test of effective deterrence which should be swift and certain;

Sixthly: The impact that police seek to have on the drug market works to the benefit of drug dealers; DLE works to raise the price of drugs and thus, it

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is hoped, put drugs beyond the reach of users. Higher prices also raise the profit margin of drug suppliers who are able to invest in measures like corruption that can better hide their tracks;

Seventhly: The demand for addictive substances by those dependent upon them is relatively insensitive to price;

Eighthly: The forbidden fruit aspects of illicit drugs is a marketing attraction. Surveys of why young people try illicit drugs reveal that a high proportion do so because it is a challenge;

Ninthly: Others turn to drugs, to avoid pain, or particularly in the case of stimulants, seek to compensate themselves for their perceived inadequacies – in other words as a form of self medication to compensate for social awkwardness.

These are the reasons why one would expect drug law enforcement to be ineffective but has it actually been so? A clear “yes” can be provided to this question on the basis of most of the market indicators of level of use, availability, price and purity mentioned in our submission, namely:

Level of use: stable at around 2%.

Methamphetamine and amphetamine use has remained stable at about 2% since 1993 and there has been a recent doubling of the use of ice, its most potent form.

Availability: consistently since 2003 some 60% or more of users surveyed have been of the view that ice was "very easy" or "easy" to obtain (p. 9)

Price: In the most populous jurisdiction of New South Wales the median retail price of ice has remained stable for the past 15 years at \$50 a point (0.1 g) (p. 10). Nationally the median price per point of ice doubled from 2011 for reasons that probably relate more to the increase of control of the trade by organised crime rather than DLE (p. 10 & figure F3 p. 12); and

Purity: surge in recent years in use of the purest form of methamphetamine, crystalline methamphetamine or ice, is strong evidence of the failure of supply reduction strategies (p. 12).

This enormous DLE effort comes at a huge financial cost. The most recent estimate of this in 2004 – 2005 by Collins and Lapsley put the crime costs

attributable to illicit drugs at \$3.84 billion. This was made up of costs of policing (\$1.7 billion), court costs, prisons, productivity foregone of prisoners (\$892.1 million), property, insurance administration and violence (Table 16 p. 49). In the same way health care costs attributable to illicit drugs were estimated by Collins and Lapsley to run at \$202 million (table 33 p. 64).

Disproportionate impact on business.

The business sector was estimated to bear in 2004/05 most of the financial burden attributable to illicit drugs namely \$3.3 bn of the \$6.7 bn tangible social costs of abuse of illicit drugs constituting 49.1% compared to \$2.7bn (41.1%) by government (Table 38, p. 67).

Disproportionate impact on State governments.

While drug policy is formulated and imposed by the Commonwealth, by virtue of its responsibility for multilateral drug treaties, it is the state and territories that bear the lion's share of the costs of that policy: 84.1%, or \$2,264.8 million while the Federal Government accounts for 15.9% (\$427.0 million) (Collins & Lapsley (2008) p.xiv & table 46, pp.72-73).

To add insult to injury, drug policy is not only ineffective and prodigally wasteful of scarce public resources, it is also unprincipled and harmful to the very people it was conceived of as protecting, namely young Australians who are the main users of illicit drugs.

The policy is harmful because the processes of the criminal law which are applied to the large number, but still tiny proportion of the drug using population, are more likely than the drugs themselves to ruin their life chances. Johann Hari has pointed out that the best antidote to drug use is fostering connection. The deterrent processes of the criminal law have completely the opposite effect, namely to disconnect those that are caught from their employment, their family and their straight peer group into the arms of a criminal peer group. Some two thirds of the clients of Australia's booming prison industry is made up of drug dependent Australians who really want to get off drugs yet are more likely than not to emerge from prison with a more intense addiction and enhanced

skills that will make them more effective criminals.

The coercion of the criminal law is also unprincipled in that its objective is to impose on individuals a priority of what they may and may not do with their own body. Ironically, there is probably no more extreme example of nanny state ideology than drug policy. The criminal processes seek to micromanage the lives of drug users. An overriding objective of drug freeness is imposed on dependent drug users that trumps any other priority that they may have in their life, whether it be dependents, work and general happiness. The enforced objective of drug freeness sets dependent users up for failure.

And we know that giving people choice and respecting autonomy does not lead to the end of the world. Heroin prescription in Switzerland since the mid 1990s has led to a 82% decline in recruitment of new regular heroin users. In Portugal the introduction of an even more ambitious policy of decriminalization of all illicit drugs including methamphetamine has since 2003 seen a reduction in consumption of illicit drugs among young adults from 34.7% in 2007 to 5% in 2012. There has been a huge reduction in new cases of blood borne disease. Police are seizing more drugs and police and Customs forces have increased their efficiency. Returning to the pre 2000 regime is the last thing that politicians of cash strapped Portugal would do.

We would make one last comment. With all your attention on crystal methamphetamines, beware what is sneaking in through the back door. In the ACT almost twice the number of people died from opioid-related deaths in 2013 and 2014 than died on the road. Nationally there are more opioid overdose deaths (649 in 2012) than occurred in 1995 (378) when Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform was born. Family Drug Support is noticing more calls about heroin on their national telephone line and a plateauing of calls about ice. Opiates are the drugs of greatest concern in the United States, which often sets the trend for Australia.

## Community Consultation on ice

Our third participation last month in the debate about ice occurred as part of a community consultation here in Canberra. The 18th November was a busy day. Not only was the FFDLR history launched at lunch time but in the evening Marion and Bill attended a Canberra Ice Forum convened by Senator Zed Seselja, at Southern Cross Club in Woden. Marion told the large gathering that many of the concerns raised were the same as were discussed twenty years ago in relation to heroin and that it was time to take a fresh approach to deal with the latest challenge. Of particular concern to Families and Friends is the impact of the fear that is being engendered by government and the media about ice. This fear has the effect of intensifying the alienation of drug users from their families and disempowering families who in their panic feel powerless. It was time, Marion said, to take a fresh approach. Her comments were very sympathetically received by the audience.

Bill Bush wrote the following comparison of the launch and the Ice forum:

### ***A TALE OF TWO DRUG MEETINGS - The public discourse is changing***

Last Wednesday [November 18th] I attended two public gatherings about drugs, each addressed by a serving Senator. The first at lunchtime heard Katy Gallagher launch a book, "The drug law wars: twenty years of families fighting at the front" by Marion and Brian McConnell. It told of the efforts of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform to secure a change to the drug policy that led to the death of their son and of the family members of many others present at that gathering.

Senator Seselja convened the second gathering in the evening to secure community input into the development of his party's policy concerning crystal methamphetamine (ice). The presence of Andrew Wall indicated that the forum would also feed into the development of the ACT Opposition's drug policy. Each meeting was very well attended, thus demonstrating the depth of community concern about illicit drugs, even in a week dominated by terrorism.

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The tone of each meeting was very different. At the first, Sen. Gallagher sympathised with the lament of the McConnells that much had not been done in the ACT that should have been to follow the lead of other countries that are moving away from policies that treat people who use illicit drugs as criminals.

For those of us whose memories span 20 years, the issues raised in the evening were eerily like those we heard when Families and Friends was born: pleas of a desperate mother in the audience whose son needed treatment now and not in weeks and months hence; elderly residents of apartment blocks disturbed by noisy comings and goings in the early hours of the morning by customers of a suspected drug dealer. Their reports to Crime Stoppers including vehicle registration numbers produced no improvement in the amenity of the worried residents. There were calls for education to younger and younger children to dissuade them from dabbling in dangerous drugs and even for education of the parents of preschool children. The Detective Sgt present confirmed that there was a lot to worry about; that one rash decision to try potent crystal meth. could ruin a whole young life. Yes, fear was in the air, just as it was 20 years ago.

There was clearly much to commend the initiative of Sen. Seselja in convening the evening gathering to secure inputs into the development of public policy. I confess, though, that the evening brought to mind recent comments of Tim Costello at a Canberra dinner forum. Tim told us of the surprise of a new member of Parliament at the open discussion among his veteran party colleagues about how to foment fear in the community to enable the government to come up with a solution. For many, the take-home messages from the evening would have been that the solution lies in more intense law enforcement and scare tactic education that, experience has told us, have failed.

Detective Sgt Gough of the drugs and organised crime team admitted to no doubts about the utility of his efforts to crack down on drugs. I can well understand his assurance for, after all, the law is clear and the first duty of the police is to enforce the law, whether effective or not but the evidence

shows that his efforts are ineffective. I would hope that all those in the enforcement, implementation and practice of the law would make it a point to become aware of this evidence. According to a famous study on cocaine use sponsored by the Rand Corporation in the United States, money spent on treatment was 7.3 times more effective than money spent on the least costly supply-control program. The illicit drug trade in Australia was worth \$7.5 billion in 2010. The 27 kg of drugs that Detective Sgt Gough proudly told us his team had taken from the streets last year has had no measurable impact on the drug market. Indeed, the peer to peer distribution system is impenetrable to policing with the risk of apprehension for even the typical user dealer vanishingly small - less than 2%. Policing success would require a sustained seizure rate of over 60% to put a successful trafficker out of business. Intelligence warns that "sustained successful interventions on this scale have never been achieved".

In the light of this reality and the pleas for more treatment, it was all the more puzzling that Andrew Wall told us he considered that a "more balanced" policy is required with a greater role for deterrence.

The bitter irony is that police rarely apprehend drug barons. Indeed, police and criminals share the same objective: to raise the price of drugs. Police hope price will make them less available; criminals to boost their business. High prices are little disincentive to a dependent drug user because in economic terms the demand for an addictive substance is relatively insensitive to price. High prices contribute significantly to the profits of organised criminals.

While those who had been to the lunch time book launch were dismayed that so little seemed to have changed over the past 20 years, I detected in the evening audience a distinctly altered tone. There was far less willingness to accept at face value the effectiveness of supply reduction and a far greater understanding of the harms that drug law enforcement, including imprisonment, inflicts even when mitigated by costly diversion schemes. My neighbour at the forum told me that a number in his extended family were into drugs and that he feared for their life chances should they be so



unlucky as to be arrested. He was also afraid of the drug driving regime that harshly penalises anyone with a detected presence of certain drugs without the need for any evidence of impairment. I would not have heard this 20 years ago.

An audience member proclaimed that any effective drug education program had to grapple with the powerful attractions of methamphetamine. Another questioner insisted that a drug strategy had to take account of the underlying pain that often motivated young people to try these drugs; that self-medication to mask pain was a significant factor in drug use. Another questioner referred to a rat experiment publicised by Johann Hari that points to a life of stimulation and personal and community connection as being the best antidote to drug use. So yes, some things have changed in 20 years. It remains to be seen whether the response of politicians has also done so.

### ***Introduction of a needle/syringe program for the ACT prison.***

On 16 November in one of his final acts as president, Brian replied to a request from the working group charged with developing and operational model for an NSP. The Working Group was established in an enterprise agreement concluded in April 2015 by the ACT Government with the Community and Public Sector Union. To be put to a vote of correctional staff at the ACT prison. Families and Friends was one of several community organisations asked to provide "advice on such things as mode of application, storage of equipment and the impact upon the existing duties of staff working at correctional facilities in the ACT, among other operational issues."

Attached to and forming part of the Families and Friends advice was an attachment prepared by Dierk von Behrens. Dierk, writing as a former active and loyal member of the CPSU, cleverly framed the case for the introduction of an NSP as a measure for the benefit of union members and their families and which would do much to enhance the reputation of the union itself. The working group is expected to take approximately 12 months to develop an operational model that will be put to a vote by eligible employees.

### ***Inauguration of Harm Reduction Australia***

An important new organisation of civil society to urge better drug policies was inaugurated in Parliament House on 26th November: Harm Reduction Australia. Brian, Marion and Bill attended. This new and potentially very influential organisation issued the following media release on the occasion:

#### **MEDIA RELEASE**

#### **Harm Reduction Australia Launched Thursday 26 November 2015**

Australia's first national harm reduction organisation for individuals committed to reducing the health, social and economic harms potentially associated with drug use - Harm Reduction Australia (HRA) – was launched today at Parliament House in Canberra

HRA was formed by a group of professionals concerned about drug policy in Australia.

Although for over thirty years Australia's National Drug Strategy has focused on harm minimisation, in recent years, the commitment and support for this evidence-based and effective approach to addressing drug use has waned across many of its government signatories.

HRA aims to develop Australia's first recognised network of individuals, including affected communities, committed to achieving and maintaining best practice harm reduction in Australia. It also seeks to educate the public, decision makers and the media about the efficacy and legitimacy of harm reduction and human rights-based policies and programs for redressing some of the potentially harmful consequences of drug use. As well as working to ensure reform to current drug policy with the primary aims of ending imprisonment, stigmatisation, discrimination and human rights violations against the people who use or have used drugs.

Annie Madden – Co-Founder of HRA stated "*Harm reduction saves lives. It is as simple as that. Without the early implementation and an ongoing support for harm reduction as a strategic policy response to HIV among people who inject drugs in*

*the mid-late 1980s in Australia, we would be struggling now with the same sorts of devastating outcomes other countries are dealing with to this day. But we can never afford to be complacent. We have averted a major HIV epidemic among people who inject drugs in Australia but hepatitis C is a very different story. We have seen a 150% increase in the death rate from hepatitis C related causes in the past 10 years the majority of which is among people who inject or have injected drugs. We still have much to do when it comes to ensuring that everyone has access to new injecting equipment for every injecting occasion. Hepatitis C is entirely preventable and harm reduction is the answer. Harm reduction is effective and cost-effective – a win for all!”*

Tony Trimmingham – HRA Vice President & Co-Founder added – *“When my son Damien got involved with heroin at the age of 21, I admit that I knew very little about hard drugs. It is also true that I did not know much more when he died of an overdose a year later. His death motivated me to learn more and at first in my anger I wanted to go after the dealers who had been supplying him drugs. Fortunately I realised quickly that no matter how much energy I put into trying to pursue then that it was largely a waste of time and effort. I then switched to trying to find out about drugs and drug policy and the concept of harm reduction. I was shocked to find that people do not need to die. It is the illegality that causes the 3 main problems – death, disease and prison. It immediately made sense to me – especially when I realised that this “War on Drugs” that we had been pursuing for 30 years was getting nowhere. It is becoming clearer to me that if we are to ensure that tens of thousands of people do not lose their lives, risk death through overdose or suffer the life-long consequences of arrests then a wide movement for change is needed. I know that the majority of people and families faced with the choice of today’s harsh approach to drug use or one based on compassion and evidence will agree with me.*

Gino Vumbaca – HRA President & Co-Founder concluded – *“Those of us that work with people affected by drug use and in drug policy believe in the principles of harm reduction. Anyone who*

*seriously reviews the evidence of this field of expertise would find it difficult to believe differently. I encourage everyone who wants to see Australia develop a more humane, effective and evidence informed response to drug use to join Harm Reduction Australia. Every membership will count and help achieve this change. It’s time for real change”*

<http://www.harmreductionaustralia.org.au/>

For further information please contact Mr Gino Vumbaca on 0408-244-552, Mr Tony Trimmingham on 0412-414-444 or Ms Annie Madden on 0414 628 136

The International Harm Reduction Association (IHRA) defines harm reduction as the ‘policies, programmes and practices that aim to reduce the harms associated with the use of psychoactive drugs in people unable or unwilling to stop. The defining features are the focus on the prevention of harm, rather than on the prevention of drug use itself, and the focus on people who continue to use drugs.’