

Julian Lowe, aged 16, is a student at Lake Ginninderra College. He lives in the Canberra suburb of Watson. Julian entered a drugs essay competition run by ACT Region for the annual Police Week which concluded in May. Julian came top, earning a prize of \$200 donated by Woden Shopping Square. Mr Frank Cranston, Chief of Staff at The Canberra Times, judged the entries.

DRUG ABUSE — THE FASHIONABLE FINISH

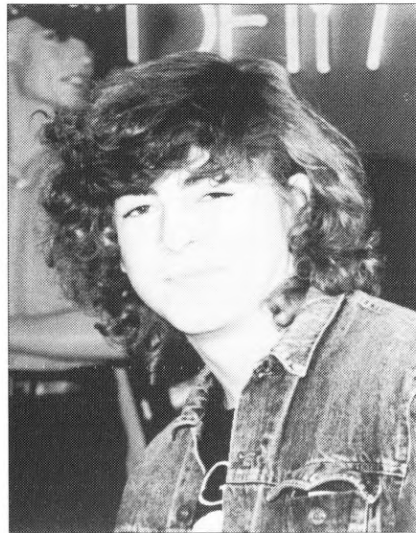
by Julian Lowe

THERE is little doubt that drug abuse, and illegal drug abuse especially has been one of the most topical issues confronting our society in recent years. It is strange to think that drugs like morphine, cocaine and heroin, originally heralded as great advances in medicine for their pain-relieving qualities, are now thought of by most people as being evil substances, responsible for a lot of pain, misery and death.

It was largely as a result of these feelings that the Government launched its 'Drug Offensive' in 1986. While considered by many people as something of a flop, the 'Drug Offensive' booklet did make one thing perfectly clear. Despite the seriousness of deaths resulting from usage of the more sensational illegal drugs, these were hugely overshadowed by fatalities connected with the socially acceptable drugs like alcohol and, even more importantly, tobacco.

To understand why young people originally became attracted to these legal drugs, it is important to look at the clever devices used by advertisers to start the chain of events that inevitably ends with people becoming statistics.

Imagine a product that is capable of turning anybody into a tough, sexually attractive, financially well-off, happy person — whatever their previous problems or shortcomings. This is the image which young people are bombarded with on television, radio, in newspapers and magazines — even when they go to football matches. And what is this wondrous product? No more than some crushed dried leaves rolled up in a piece of paper. Alcohol advertising is very similar. All this hype for substances which will clog your lungs, destroy your brain, play havoc with your internal organs, wreck your appearance and, if you use them for long enough — kill you.



Not that this is anything new; people have known about these facts for many years. And yet, still, governments permit widespread and misleading advertising about these dangerous products to continue.

Illegal drugs, while not openly advertised, have a similar aura attached to them. The very fact that they are illegal is an attraction to many young people, as it offers a certain daring quality which they feel their own lives cannot equal. People who use illegal drugs, whether it's marijuana or the harder variety, are thought of as being in some way tougher or more grown up than others. To adolescents, who are influenced to a huge extent by peer group pressure, this need to be tough and to fit in with other 'tough' people is incredibly important.

It all comes back to rebelling against the established order. The higher the penalty, the more 'tough' it becomes to challenge that penalty.

Drugs are cool. Drugs are fun. Drugs are tough. Drugs are exciting. These are the ideas that attract young people in the first place. It is only when they're addicted and feeling the pain and the expense that

people can see just how ridiculous these ideas really are. But, by then, it's often too late. Cigarettes and alcohol may take longer to take hold — but the result is the same.

People must see that by 'rebelling' against one part of society they are merely conforming to the mindless and crazy belief that there is something exciting and different about filling yourself up with things that do little more than leave you more depressed than you were originally.

In our society, fashion and the need to conform play an important role in affecting the way individuals act. We must not forget that drug abuse is a fad, a fashion, and like all fashions it will come and go. As far as illegal drugs are concerned, it may be that the only way out of the problem is through it — eventually people will learn that the thrill leaves only a need for more, and more again — never satisfaction. With the socially acceptable drugs, the greater problem in my opinion, the solution is a simpler though equally unpalatable one. If further widespread smoking and drinking is to be avoided, then the problem must be attacked at its roots, that is, the advertising which falsely promotes these legal addictions must be banned — totally. The manufacturers of these products claim that if it is legal to produce something, then it should be legal to advertise it. Very well, let them advertise it — but without misleading information to distract young people from what these substances really are — dangerous drugs.

Unfortunately, even these precautions cannot wipe drugs out of our society. We must look at the psychological reasons why people feel they need these things to be happy, to be tough — to belong. Only when people work together to solve these problems will drug abuse be a thing of the past. ●