

Who has the drug abuse?

It is obvious that drug abuse is affecting all our lives, whether directly or indirectly. What is less obvious is the extent of that abuse and how workable solutions can be achieved to deal with the problems.

Do people really understand the issues? Do people know what substance abuse means and where the problems mainly lie? What's causing the most harm – is it heroin or tobacco, marijuana or alcohol? Who has the answers?

These are just some of the questions that the House of Representatives Family and Community Affairs Committee is asking as part of its new inquiry into the social and economic costs of drug abuse to our community.

House Committee Chair, Barry Wakelin (Member for Grey, South Australia), has been a strong advocate for a parliamentary drug abuse inquiry. He said that this inquiry was welcome, yet overdue.

"It's been 20 years since Parliament held a broad-ranging inquiry into legal and illegal drug abuse," Mr Wakelin said. "Obviously, the impact of drugs on our society has changed radically since the 1970's. Even though a lot has been done and achieved by both government and non-government agencies to try and address the issues facing us, the costs of drug abuse keep rising – both socially and economically.

"Drug abuse takes its toll in terms of individual suffering and social harm. There is evidence that it costs the Australian community more than \$18 billion annually. I know every Committee member is concerned about the impact drugs has on their electorate and the whole of Australia. As a Committee we work together and across party lines to get the best outcomes."

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Mr Wakelin said that the Committee aims through its inquiry to further the current debate and offer workable solutions.

David Crosbie, Director with Odyssey House, supports the inquiry and believes that there are already many proven 'workable solutions' that need to be considered seriously during the inquiry.

Odyssey House was established 21 years ago to support people with drug addiction (alcohol and illicit drugs). It provides a residential program for more than 80 people and has outreach services as well as classes in anger management, harm reduction and relapse prevention.

Mr Crosbie will present two submissions to the House Committee – one on alcohol taxation and the other on the supply and demand of treatment programs and how the demand is not being met.

"There are so many people who want help and support, but are just not getting it because the programs are not available," Mr Crosbie said. "While we continue to have an inadequate response to those who want to change their lives, and we continue not to support them, then harm will be done to society.

"Drugs and the availability of treatment and detox programs is a big moral issue," Mr Crosbie added. "We don't turn people away who need treatment for high blood pressure or diabetes, but we do with drugs. It's the belief that because they are addicts they deserve what they get and deserve to suffer. It's their choice! But that isn't understanding the real issue of addiction – which is what leads a person to addiction. This is the social issue.

"While heroin is still the biggest problem in Odyssey House and heroin has become the darling of the media – it isn't the drug that is causing the greatest amount of social and economic impact in Australia," Mr Crosbie explained. "The winner here is alcohol. Even a significant proportion of heroin deaths aren't caused by heroin, but by the alcohol that is taken along with the heroin."

"All you have to do is go around on a Saturday night in a police van or visit the casualty department of any hospital and see that alcohol has the biggest impact on society. It was the same in 1975 when the last parliamentary inquiry was undertaken into substance abuse, and 25 years later nothing has changed. The name of the report then was *An Intoxicated Society*. It might as well be the name of the next report!"

David Crosbie claims we only need to look north to find the key answer to the alcohol problem. He explained how the Northern Territory Government has saved \$129 million by placing an additional tax on cask wine and full strength beer. The Territory Government also funded its own advertising campaign to promote light beer. Following the 'lighten up in the Territory' campaign, light beer now has a 20 per cent share of the beer market. A remarkable achievement considering for Territorians the beer of choice had always been full strength beer. The social impact has also been significant with fewer road fatalities and a decrease in domestic violence.

"There is no doubt that the increased levy on cask wine and full strength beer has had an impact on human lives," Mr Crosbie added. "Cask wine and full strength beer are the drinks of choice for most alcoholics. These are cheap and easy to get, yet a \$20 bottle of wine is less of a problem and has more taxes. We have a tax system that is very anti-health and if there is one thing that I would change tomorrow – it would be this."

If Brian McConnell, President of the Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform, could change one thing overnight, it would be to have his son back. His 24 year old son died of a heroin overdose in 1992. The next best thing he would want to change is the attitudes towards illicit drugs. His aim is to assist others, influence policy makers and hopefully prevent another parent's child from dying.

Answers to



Photograph from NewsPix.

When Mr McConnell's son overdosed, the ambulance had been called and so had the police. His son was taken to a hospital and when he woke up the police were beside his bed. This frightened him and he disappeared. Two weeks later he overdosed again and died alone. His family had not seen him during this time and despite their efforts they could not find him.

"Drug addiction should not be treated as a crime, but as a health issue," Mr McConnell said. "In 1998, there were 737 deaths from drug overdoses and this number is increasing dramatically each year. When my son first overdosed, we couldn't understand why the police were there. So many people won't ring for help because they are frightened that the police will get involved."

Mr McConnell said that not all police are the "heavy hand of the law" and he applauds the ACT police for clearly stating that they will no longer attend overdose cases. This is something that the Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform would like to see

adopted by all police throughout Australia and is one of the 19 recommendations the group has made to the House Family and Community Affairs Committee inquiry into drug abuse. The group also recommends that the House Committee should review successful drug treatment programs in other countries, but it stresses that it is essential to research and evaluate all programs carefully so they are suitable and relevant for Australians.

Dr Kerry Phelps, President of the Australian Medical Association, agrees that the House Committee must get evidence that is appropriate. She claims that the best way to achieve this is by talking to the users, alcoholics and people who have experienced the problems.

"We just can't guess at the problems," Dr Phelps said. "We have to find answers and we need some innovative approaches so we can solve the health, social and economic problems associated with substance abuse. The way we have managed so far hasn't been satisfactory. Something needs to be done urgently and this inquiry is a start. We need to talk to the people who have been affected by the misuse and abuse. I really believe they can help with suggesting some workable solutions."

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"We shouldn't be afraid to try some unorthodox approaches, such as taking drug abuse out of the criminal justice system. This is a bold move, but if you look at the prison population and see how many crimes are drug related, it proves that we are not managing the issues," Dr Phelps added. "The problems associated with substance abuse aren't just one or two dimensional. They cross different ages and different cultures and include alcohol, tobacco and illicit drugs. Education and awareness of the impacts to society are vital."

David Crosbie explained that the most alarming statistics have not reached us yet. He said the single biggest trend in drug use has been the increase in female users. He said that so far this has not translated into harm statistics, but for women suicide is increasing, overdoses are increasing and crime is increasing.

"Fifteen years ago women caught up with men in tobacco use, then 10 years ago it was binge drinking, five years ago with cannabis and in recent years it has been heroin," Mr Crosbie explained. "People seem to be more accommodating because they are women. But, because they are women it doesn't mean they will harm themselves or others less or they will be less violent and do less crime to support their addiction."

Barry Wakelin, House Committee Chair, said that the impact of drug use is affecting all Australians. This is why the House Committee is committed to visiting all major capital cities and a number of regional centres to ensure that Members see first hand the problems that people are experiencing.

"We shouldn't kid ourselves that we can have a drug free society," Mr Wakelin said. "We never have had and we never will. But, the Committee through its inquiry needs to really look at the issues and provide informed recommendations that are workable and manageable."