

Drastic reduction in heroin supply

Customs praised for interception efforts

By Doug Johnson

Customs drug-interception efforts have received strong endorsement in a report about the Australian heroin shortage. The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre report, *The causes, course and consequences of the heroin shortage in Australia*, examined the dramatic reduction in the supply of heroin experienced in Australia beginning in late 2000.

The report provides a detailed description of the cause of the heroin shortage, a comprehensive analysis of its effects and an examination of the factors contributing to its occurrence. It recognises the pivotal role of law enforcement, especially the role of Customs and the Federal Police in protecting the border and targeting high-level players, in reducing the availability of heroin on Australian streets.

The researchers used data and expertise from a variety of sources, including the Law Enforcement Strategy and Risk Identification and Intelligence areas of Customs.

Examining a range of possible explanations, the researchers recognised that law-enforcement efforts were central in the reduced supply and use of heroin. The researchers noted in the report:

"The most important implication of the heroin shortage is that it is possible under some circumstances for law enforcement to accomplish a substantial reduction in the availability of imported drugs like heroin."

In particular, the report flags the success of law enforcement in reducing the supply of heroin with a large number of seizures and making it increasingly difficult for crime groups to import heroin undetected.

The report was funded by the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund and released at a meeting of the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy.

In a media release, the Minister for Justice and Customs,

Senator Chris Ellison, noted, "The report also recognises the pivotal role of law enforcement in reducing the availability of heroin on Australian streets and the flow-on benefits to the Australian community which include reduced crime rates, improvements in health and reduction in deaths from heroin overdoses."

The impact of the shortage on crime has been noted before. Last year, the Director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, Dr Don Weatherburn, attributed the significant decline in crime in that state to the heroin shortage.

The impacts on health have been equally dramatic. Treatment facilities saw an increase in requests for treatment by some groups of heroin users, while some, especially younger, less-established users, decided to stop using the drug. A very direct and dramatic impact can be seen in the sharp reduction in fatal overdoses attributed to heroin in the past several years. From a high of 1116 such deaths in Australia in 1999, the number declined to 357 deaths nation-wide in 2003, the latest year for which official Australian Bureau of Statistics figures are available.

The report also commented on a very significant contribution of Commonwealth supply reduction efforts to the prevention of drug use when it noted, "One plausible hypothesis is that a one-to-two-year gap in the initiation of new heroin users may have a large positive cumulative effect."

While the shortage was at its peak in early 2001, available intelligence indicates that supply remains well below the availability before the shortage. For example, the 2003 *Drug Use Monitoring in Australia Annual Report* indicated that heroin use among Australian detainees was still below the levels recorded before the heroin shortage.

Copies of the report can be obtained from the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund website - www.ndlerf.gov.au. Alternatively, Law Enforcement Strategy in Central Office may be able to provide photocopies.

