

Anti-drug campaigns work by provoking people close to users - 29 Sep 2007

Margaret Hamilton, 29 September 2007



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DO shocking and confronting campaigns that accurately represent the dangers of illicit drugs really work?

After many years working on campaigns designed to raise awareness about the effects illicit drugs can have, including the "ice" television commercial currently airing, I am struck by how difficult it is to explain them.

My colleagues and friends are often critical in their responses, which include: This is over the top. Why bother? Mass communication is ineffective. What about more damaging and prevalent substances such as alcohol and all the trouble that causes? This won't stop users using drugs.

Colleagues are right to challenge the use of expensive means to communicate messages, influence attitudes, beliefs, expectations and sometimes behaviours. They are right to be sceptical. They are right to wonder whether these campaigns make a difference.

But they are usually wrong in their commentary. I have sometimes looked at prepared advertisements for drug campaigns. I can initially react in a similar way to my colleagues and think that they are sometimes irrelevant, inaccurate -- often exaggerated -- portrayals of the real world.

I have to remember that I am not the primary target audience.

In my role with the Australian National Council on Drugs, I have had the opportunity to work carefully and systematically with many others in helping to guide the development of the current illicit drug campaign.

I have come to learn that what I see is not what the primary target audiences see; the messages that I get are not the same as they get; and I have affirmed by theoretical understanding that we need to go to careful testing with target audiences to appreciate just what an image or advertisement contains, what impact it has and what possible effects.

There is no doubt that illicit drugs are in our community and relatively readily available. The nature and extent of this availability varies. Fortunately, most young people are not interested in using them -- sometimes because they are scared of what they will do to them, and sometimes because they have seen friends negatively affected by them.

Those who do use them, or have used them, are also sometimes fearful of them. Sometimes they are not, and continue to use them.

A strategy like this one is targeting the majority of the population -- in this instance primarily young people who have not used these drugs and are disinclined to use them. The purpose is to reaffirm their inclination not to use them; to reinforce the potential harm and problems associated with these illicit drugs.

But the campaign is not only designed to reach the potential user. The intent is also to provide a stimulus for parents and responsible adults to talk with their children and young people about drugs more openly and to seek information to facilitate these conversations. We can underestimate the power a parent can have when talking clearly and concisely with their children about illicit drugs.

We know from the previous phases of this campaign many more parents felt empowered to talk with their young people about drugs; young people did think the ads credible and remembered them. These are good outcomes.

For those who would benefit from help to change their drug use, the campaign provides help for them to find a route to support if they seek it. This group is not, however, the primary audience for these television advertisements. It is not expected that all young people currently using ice or other amphetamines, cannabis/marijuana, heroin or other illicit drugs will stop in response to these ads. Perhaps some will be helped to do so, through indirect measures and conversations they will have that might be prompted by this campaign.

This campaign has included the involvement of a number of scientists, public servants, medical staff from accident and emergency departments and other health professionals including nurses, drug treatment workers, parents, school teachers, a dentist as well as young people and professorial associates expert in the development and evaluation of health related campaigns. All have been active in developing the current illicit drug campaign images and portrayals. This has also included testing ideas from enthusiastic amateurs including politicians and, where found wanting in evaluation and testing, these ideas have appropriately been abandoned.

Research shows those campaigns about illicit drugs, and tobacco and alcohol, have an important place in the spectrum of preventative measures available to help protect young people from unwise choices.

We simply need to remember not to make the mistake to see the advertisements or messages through only our own eyes.

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