


Australia at risk of increased quantities of heroin coming in—March 2009

Associate Professor Robert Ali says Australia is at risk of increased quantities of Afghani heroin because of the conflict there and the breakdown of law and order in South West Asia. 

Robert Ali — who chairs the ANCD's Asia-Pacific Committee — says 90% of the world's heroin is now coming straight out of Afghanistan. He says after declines in the use of heroin in Australia from 2001 and declines in the number of overdoses, there are new risks for Australia.

Associate Professor Ali says there's been a significant global increase in heroin production with concentration in Afghanistan. He says this has very serious implications for Australia and the region.

He warns that the rise in heroin in the region has the clear potential to lead to an increase in Australia and hence the number of injecting drug users as well as issues that are associated with that including the increased risk of HIV infection.

The warning comes as the ANCD points out that:

- Global opium production has now reached record levels... globally opium production has increased by 102% in the period 1998–2007.
- Opium cultivation in South East Asia has increased by 22% after 6 years in decline. Most of this was through a 29% increase in Myanmar (Burma) to 27,700 hectares.
- 51% of the world's heroin users are in Asia — reflecting the fact that opium consumption is still widespread across the Asian region.
- 80% of global opiate seizures in 2006 were made in Asia... 69% of them were in South West Asia.
- The number border detections of heroin in 2006/07 was the highest on record.
- In 2006/07 the weight of heroin seizures in Australia increased by 192%. In essence, the amount of heroin seized in Australia in 2006/07 doubled from the previous year.

Associate Professor Robert Ali says it's vital that Australia provides assistance to our neighbouring countries to introduce effective HIV prevention and drug treatment programs for drug users given our internationally recognised success in these areas.

Associate Professor Robert Ali said “When we look at the global drug problem, the threat that is causing the most concern is the risk of HIV. There are now 128 countries that have detected HIV amongst drug users. One third of all new HIV infections now occur outside of sub-Saharan Africa, and one third of these are due to injecting drug use.”

Associate Professor Ali says while heroin from Afghanistan is often smoked, of great concern are reports indicating it is also being produced in a more processed form to allow easier injection.

Associate Professor Robert Ali highlights that since 2001 there has been a dramatic decline in the number of heroin overdose deaths in Australia.

Associate Professor Ali said “This welcome decline in deaths in Australia reflects law enforcement efforts in

reducing supply, increased investment and availability of treatment and innovative peer-based education work by users themselves. However, the number of fatalities still exceeds an average of one person a day and this means a tremendous amount of trauma for families and friends everyday across Australia.”

He also warns it's vital that Australia provides assistance to countries in the region dealing with a HIV epidemic. He says as Australia has been spared from the HIV epidemic amongst injecting drug users through effective strategies such as needle and syringe and methadone programs. Australia now has an obligation to provide assistance to other countries in the region.

Associate Professor Robert Ali said “Reports from some countries that 40 per cent or more of their injecting drug users are HIV positive are not uncommon. We have a great reservoir of professional ability in Australia in the areas of supply, demand and harm reduction programs. Now is the time to mobilise this expertise so that we can assist our neighbours in building their capacity to effectively address these problems.”

Associate Professor Robert Ali says this could lead to an improvement of our border security by reducing the demand for drugs, reducing HIV infections in our region and reducing the likelihood of drugs being shipped to Australia. He says it could also reduce the risk of Australian travellers and workers throughout the region from being infected by HIV.

Associate Professor Ali said “Australia needs to be ever vigilant and engaged with what is happening in our region if the results of our good work over many years are going to be maintained into the future.”

Gino Vumbaca, Executive Director of the ANCD concluded “At a time when the nations of the world are gathering at the United Nations offices in Vienna to review the global response to illicit drugs over the past 10 years it is imperative that Australia take an important leadership role in the region to promote our balanced and pragmatic approaches to reducing illicit drug use and its harms.”

For further information, please contact:

Mr Gino Vumbaca (ANCD Executive Director)
0408 244 552