

Heroin: flood or drought?

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In an effort to assist governments, policy makers, media and the public to better understand the situation regarding the availability of heroin in Australia the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) is today releasing some salient advice on the matter.

Major Brian Watters, Chairman of the ANCD said “There is currently a lot of speculation about heroin ‘flooding back’ onto Australian streets as a result of a record harvest in Afghanistan. With the assistance of law enforcement, health and drug research agencies the ANCD is drawing attention to some important facts to better inform this debate”

These facts are:

- The substantial majority of heroin available in Australia originates from the area known as the Golden Triangle – not Afghanistan. For example, since 1980 there has been no Afghanistan produced heroin identified and recorded as being seized in the state of Victoria.
- The variable rise and fall of heroin production has little impact on heroin availability in Australia. For example, the current heroin shortage in Australia commenced prior to any effects of the Taliban inspired production falls in Afghanistan; and a previous poor crop in Myanmar (within the Golden Triangle) in 1999 did not lead to any real reduction in the availability of heroin in Australia that year.
- The United Nations has recognised that the scale of the heroin shortage being experienced in Australia over the past 2 years is unique.
- The number of fatal heroin related overdoses in Australia has not substantially increased as suggested in recent media reports. In fact, the current figures from Victoria (the jurisdiction with the most up to date and accessible data) appear to be consistent with the number of fatal overdoses for the previous 2 years of approximately 50-60, well below the more than 300 deaths that occurred in 1999. It should also be noted that despite media reports to the contrary there are no accurate, publicly available figures on the number of ambulance call outs to non-fatal heroin related overdoses available for 2003, including Victoria.
- There are occasional reports, generally anecdotal, that some drug and alcohol agencies are experiencing a noticeable increase in the number of heroin users appearing for treatment and assistance.
- Despite some anecdotal evidence suggesting that heroin availability is higher, most jurisdiction in Australia are not reporting any real changes in heroin availability, with all states and territories still rating heroin availability as low to medium. Although it is true that heroin availability will fluctuate, there is no evidence to suggest that its availability has returned to anywhere near the levels of 1998 and 1999.
- The current heroin shortage and resulting overdose reductions can probably be best attributed to a combination of factors, these include; the disruption of key importers by Australia’s law enforcement agencies at local, national and international levels; cyclical changes in drug use; the increased availability of residential and pharmacotherapy treatments; the introduction of a national diversion program for drug offenders and; the introduction of key peer based overdose reduction strategies. The global illicit drug markets respond to shifts in consumer preferences, law enforcement pressure and social and

technological changes. Examples of this changing environment are the significant seizures of illicit drugs in the last 3 years and the current increasing production, use and seizure of amphetamine type substances across South East Asia and Australia. In effect, Australia is part of the global illicit drugs market and responds to local and global effects in this environment.

Australian Federal Police Commissioner and Deputy Chair of the ANCD, Mick Keelty added “There is no doubt that Australia’s recent reduction in heroin availability is unique to Australia, and can be attributed in some part to the efforts directed at disrupting the operations of major drug importers. With the assistance of all my law enforcement colleagues, both here and internationally, this is a situation we will be endeavouring to maintain. However, we all must understand that illegal drug importers will always be trying to subvert our efforts, something which only serves to make the reduction of demand for drugs through prevention, education and treatment programs a vital component of any comprehensive approach to reducing the problems caused by drugs.”

Major Watters added - “The Federal Government’s Tough on Drugs Strategy is designed to be tough on the drug importers and dealers, and the misery and death from which they derive their profit. Indeed, as I have said many times, and will continue to say, the dramatic reduction in overdose deaths as a result of heroin shortages and increased access to treatment is very welcome news for drug users, their families and the community as a whole.”

Major Watters concluded – “The efforts of the Federal Government, often in partnership with their state and territory counterparts, to prioritise drug issues deserves commendation. In fact, the ANCD has been, and will continue to advise governments that their efforts are starting to show real rewards for the community and that a continued focus on this issue may actually start to cement these gains into the future.”

In summary the ANCD can advise that although minor fluctuations in the availability of heroin will occur there is little hard evidence to suggest that heroin is ‘flooding’ back to the streets or that it has reached anywhere near a level of availability comparable to that of the late 1990’s. It is however, strongly acknowledged that the successes of the past and the present will not be maintained without an ongoing commitment by all governments and communities to prevent, educate and treat drug use through a co-ordinated national strategy that includes supply, demand and harm reduction components.

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The ANCD is the principal advisory body to Government on drug and alcohol issues.

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