

National Council warns on the links between tobacco and illicit drug use

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At its most recent meeting in Hobart the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) discussed the emerging links between tobacco smoking, health status and illicit drug use in Australia.

The Council, which is the peak advisory body to Government on drug policy established by the Prime Minister in March 1998, invited Dr David Hill, Chairman of the National Expert Advisory Committee on Tobacco, to discuss current issues and trends.

Major Watters commented, "The most disadvantaged groups in our society are also those who have the highest rates of smoking. We know that tobacco and smoking causes the most drug related harm in our community, and whilst it is pleasing to see some decline in smoking amongst certain groups, the fact remains that smoking is an expensive and deadly habit. Yet those who can least afford it – both in terms of their health and their finances – that are smoking at the highest rates".

The Council discussed and fully supported the aims of the National Tobacco Strategy and it's focus on preventing the uptake of smoking, reducing the number of users of tobacco products, and reducing exposure to the harmful health consequences of smoking. In addition, the ANCD identified some other areas it considers to be important to pursue.

Professor Webster, an executive member of the Council, added – "We heard of some possible disturbing links between smoking and mental health. These links need to be carefully examined, as rigorously as other health consequences such as heart disease and lung cancer have been. Clearly, if tobacco is exacerbating the mental health problems for many in our community then we need to develop new strategies to deal with this".

The ANCD also learned of some very worrying correlations between parents who smoke tobacco and the drug taking behaviours of their children.

Another Council member, Professor Wayne Hall said, "The Council is not interested in blaming parents who smoke for their children's behaviours. However, the ANCD

is interested in finding out about some of the enticements for young people to take up using illicit drugs, and there is some indication that parental smoking may be a factor".

The ANCD also discussed the need to ensure that those strategies that are proving effective – such as Nicotine Replacement Therapies (NRT) – are affordable to those who most need it.

Professor Hamilton, an Executive member of the Council said - "Accessibility of NRT's is an important issue if

we are to successfully encourage people to kick the habit. Tobacco addiction is one of the most difficult to overcome and unless products designed to assist people are affordable and accessible, we are likely to continue to see poor rates of cessation amongst some groups. It is encouraging to see that the work done to raise people's awareness of smoking related health problems is working – people are more aware of the dangers than they were 20 years ago – but that is not always enough. We need to provide some more tangible help".

"Of course increased access to NRT's is not a panacea, there are other strategies and programs that need to be given adequate funding, to ensure there is a comprehensive approach to reducing smoking rates in our community," Professor Hamilton added.

Mr Gino Vumbaca, Executive Officer for the Council added, "The ANCD intends to follow these issues up over the course of 2001. In keeping with its call on the alcohol industry to take more responsibility for the harms their products cause, the Council is intent on ensuring the two most damaging drugs in our society – alcohol and tobacco – are not forgotten in the national debate around drugs, and that the respective industries financially contribute to reduce the community burden their products continue to cause".

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