

A statement by the ANCD

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The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) carefully monitors the evidence, data and subsequent debates on drug and alcohol issues, including those on the levels of drug use and links to mental health. It is important that debate on these issues is based on the best evidence available. Australia has one of the most comprehensive and accurate national drug use data collection systems available. Australia also publicly reports all this information. Unfortunately this is not always the case in some countries, and so it requires us to be cautious when making international comparisons.

Most Australians recognise the damaging impact of drug abuse on the individual, family and community and want action to prevent and respond to the harms caused by drugs. Australia's National Drug Strategy, and its associated policies and programs, is based on the best available evidence. The achievements of this evidence based and balanced approach, with its strong emphasis on partnership between law enforcement and health, has had enduring benefits that are plain to see in some of the information provided below.

Since the commencement of the Australian Government's comprehensive drugs strategy in 1997, substantial new funding has been introduced for increasing treatment availability, supply reduction initiatives, as well as widespread prevention campaigns. Over this time of continuing investment there has been a significant decline in the number of people who have used an illicit drug in Australia in the previous 12 months, down from 20% in 1998 to just over 15% of the population today. We must be attentive in protecting and enhancing this good work of recent years.

Some further information on these issues is provided below:

- Alcohol and tobacco remain the most socially, economically and health damaging drugs in Australia
- Since 2001 the average age of people trying illicit drugs for the first time has increased from 18.6yrs to 19.4yrs, a figure which supports one of the aims of the Australian National Drug Strategy to prevent and delay the uptake of illicit drugs. This shift is very important given the growing evidence that substance use of any kind when the brain is still developing poses a greater risk for a range of mental health problems.
- Since 1998 the level of recent heroin use in Australia has decreased from 0.8% of the population aged over 14 years to 0.2%
- The level of fatal heroin related overdoses in Australia has declined from a peak of over 1,100 people in 1999 to less than 400 today—a saving of over 700 lives each year
- The level of HIV amongst Australian injecting drug users—estimated to be between 1%–2% is one of the lowest in the world
- Since 1998 the level of recent ecstasy use in Australia amongst people aged 14 years or more has increased from 2.4% to 3.4%. Ecstasy and methamphetamines are the current illicit drugs of concern regarding increasing use and harm
- Australia has a mature and sophisticated drug treatment service network, with the level of accessibility and availability of this treatment having increased significantly since 1997. However, the level of dependent heroin users in treatment in Australia is estimated to be below 50%—this is still lower than some Western countries where rates above 70% are achieved

In regard to the current debate surrounding cannabis, the ANCD continues to be concerned with the

increased risk of poor physical and mental health through problematic use, especially for younger people. The ANCD believes that when responding to this concern Australia needs to take into account the current data and emerging evidence, and just as importantly, the gaps in our knowledge on the impact of this drug:

- Since 1998, we have seen a significant decline in recent cannabis use from 17% of the population aged over 14 years in Australia to just over 11%—the lowest recorded figure since national data collection began in 1991. We have also seen decreases in the levels of cannabis use amongst secondary school students over this time.
- People can become dependent on cannabis. Cannabis dependence can also be treated, though the availability of specific treatments is still somewhat limited.
- The number of cannabis users being referred to treatment has been increasing. This may be explained by a combination of an increase in the number of users engaging in heavy problematic cannabis use, a greater recognition of cannabis dependence and treatment, and the successful diversion of some cannabis users from the law enforcement system into treatment.
- There is a growing body of evidence that heavy, intensive use of cannabis, particularly on a daily basis significantly increases the risk for a range of health problems, including mental illness.
- There is growing evidence that cannabis use by young people is associated with a range of negative health and social outcomes such as poorer school performance, leaving school earlier, leaving the family home earlier and earlier sexual activity. However, the exact nature of the relationship of these problems with cannabis use is not clear due other social and economic factors that can also contribute to these problems.
- Some people using cannabis experience very serious psychological effects such as severe anxiety or panic, however these effects generally disappear when they stop using the drug.
- There is evidence that cannabis use by people with a pre-disposition to schizophrenia or those who are vulnerable to developing such problems and those who have a family history of mental illness are at significantly greater risk of harms.
- If a person uses cannabis when they already suffer from schizophrenia, their symptoms may become more severe and difficult to manage.
- There is emerging but limited evidence that cannabis may cause psychotic symptoms in people who are not at risk of this condition
- The link between mental illness and cannabis use continues to divide the scientific community. Whilst some recent studies are showing a close relationship between cannabis use and increased risk of mental illness, further research is required to understand the exact nature of this link.
- There are serious concerns regarding the effects of cannabis use on memory and learning, however it is still unclear whether cannabis causes lasting problems in these areas.

The Australian National Council on Drugs will continue to work closely with the Australian Government, as well as State & Territory Governments to develop effective evidence based policies that address licit and illicit drug use problems. We are also pleased to note the establishment of an expert panel to look at cannabis issues and look forward to the outcomes of their deliberations. To further assist in these ongoing debates the ANCD has recently released a report on the availability of drug and alcohol treatment in Australia, and will also be releasing a plain language booklet on the current state of knowledge regarding the impact and health effects of cannabis (due for release in early 2006), and a report on the evidence and the principles that must underpin any discussion on compulsory treatment (due for release in late 2006).

9 November 2005

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

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