

Drug and alcohol reports of national interest - 25 August 2014

National Council Releases Drug and Alcohol Reports of National Interest



MEDIA RELEASE

25 August 2014

The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) is the principal advisory body to the Prime Minister and Federal Government on drug and alcohol policy

In releasing today's reports Dr Herron, the Chairman of the ANCD advised:

"This current term of the ANCD will end in the next month and some time ago I advised the Prime Minister and Health Ministers that after more than 8 very honoured years as Chairman I would not be seeking reappointment. Accordingly, in the lead up to the conclusion of the current Council's term, we have been considering a number of issues of concern in the community. Most recently we have focused on alcohol policy and school drug and alcohol policy issues – which we are pleased has been acted upon by some governments - and these new papers we also believe will help inform the community, people working with drug and alcohol issues and key decision makers to take effective action. I also take this opportunity to thank the 4 Prime Ministers I have served in my time as Chairman and for the opportunity to work with so many dedicated, knowledgeable and astute people on the ANCD. I wish the ANCD continued success and impact with its work."

The ANCD Executive of Prof Margaret Hamilton, Mr Garth Pople and A/Professor Robert Ali and all members of the ANCD congratulated and thanked Dr Herron for his leadership and joined him in releasing the following reports and papers today:

1. Medicinal Use of Cannabis Background & Information Paper
2. National Survey of Young People on Drug & Alcohol Policies
3. Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) Medications Paper
4. Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) Treatment Information Sheet
5. Family Sensitive Drug and Alcohol Practices Report

Medicinal Use of Cannabis Background & Information Paper

In reviewing all the available evidence and considering the needs of some people unable to obtain relief from some severe symptoms resulting from a range of medical conditions the ANCD has developed a background and information paper to highlight the need for further research into the medicinal use of cannabis. The Council paper also highlights the many issues to resolve, including the most appropriate means of providing

access to cannabis for patients and limiting the potential for access beyond those with legitimate medical needs if medicinal cannabis programs are to be introduced.

Dr John Herron, ANCD Chairman echoed the complexities associated with the medicinal cannabis programs:

“As a medical practitioner I am concerned that the evidence for medicinal cannabis remains relatively weak. The harms associated with smoking and cannabis use are well documented. Additionally, our poor record in keeping pharmaceutical pain relief medication restricted to only those who are prescribed to use it concerns me when we talk about making another drug available for medicinal use only, especially given the level of non-medical use of cannabis we know occurs. There are a range of frontline medications available for people in pain and suffering and it is important that we do not exacerbate our current problems with the misuse of medications without proper and thorough examination of all the issues involved if governments were to establish a medicinal cannabis program”

Mr Gino Vumbaca, the Executive Director of the ANCD, added that:

“The Council members have been actively considering and discussing the medicinal use of cannabis for some time. Balancing the needs of patients, health systems, law enforcement and the community is not an easy task in any drug policy but the Council has determined that whilst further evidence on the efficacy of medicinal cannabis is gathered – particularly from current programs in place around the world – that we also need to consider options to address the concerns of patients currently using cannabis for medicinal purposes only.”

The ANCD has also noted that views of many people in Australia have shifted over time to support a more compassionate approach for patients who wish to use cannabis for medicinal purposes. The Council believes that Australian governments, health, law enforcement and regulatory experts should meet to discuss this matter.

A full copy of the Background and Information Paper is available at: www.ancd.org.au

Young People’s Opinions on Alcohol and other Drugs Issues – National Survey

The ANCD commissioned the Drug Policy Modelling Program at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW, to undertake an online, anonymous, Australia-wide survey to describe and better understand young people’s ideas about responding to alcohol and other drugs, and to ensure that the views of young Australians are considered in alcohol and other drug policy deliberations.

With a sample of over 2,300 young people (between 16 and 25 years of age) these young people made it clear that they want their views to be included in the development of policies and programs for drug and alcohol use.

The survey provides a real insight into the thinking of young people with strong beliefs such as:

- Supporting access to drug treatment services, including drug withdrawal treatment and residential rehabilitation.
- Supporting harm reduction measures - over two-thirds supported needle and syringe programs, regulated injecting facilities, and the availability of pill testing equipment or kits

- Supporting government intervention only when a person's drug use is causing harm to someone else
- Supporting policies that help them to access accurate, balanced, relevant drug information and education; they would like to be free to make informed decisions about the risks, or benefits, of using drugs
- Supporting approaches to new and emerging psychoactive substances with regulation and opposing outright bans
- Supporting the legalization of personal use of cannabis, with a preference for education and treatment being the first line response by governments.
- Opposing measures that are designed to restrict alcohol availability, including restricted trading hours, increased prices and reduced numbers of outlets selling alcohol
- Opposing the use of sniffer dogs in public places

The survey found that there were differences between the opinions of those who had used drugs and/or alcohol and those who had never done so but these differences were smaller than differences associated with attitudes towards alcohol and other drugs, such as beliefs about the risks and benefits of alcohol and other drug use.

The ANCD understands that young people have strong views on current drug and alcohol policies and the results of this survey demonstrate the need for a much greater level of discussion and engagement with young people on the evidence underpinning various policy responses.

A full copy of the report is available at: www.ancd.org.au

Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) Medications Paper

The heightened concern with ATS use often raises questions regarding the availability of pharmacotherapy treatments similar to methadone and buprenorphine which are used for heroin and other opiate dependencies.

The ANCD commissioned LeeJenn Health Consultants to review the international literature and evidence on the current efficacy and progress towards developing frontline ATS pharmacotherapy treatments. Unfortunately the review was unable to highlight any pharmacotherapy treatment that demonstrated the evidence required for widespread use although some medications are showing signs of promise.

The paper provides a review of the evidence for these medications and a full copy of the Report is available at: www.ancd.org.au

Amphetamine Type Stimulants (ATS) Treatment Information Sheet

The current public discourse on ATS and in particular the panic regarding 'ice' is a matter of real concern for the Council and many working in the field. Whilst there is some evidence of greater levels of harm occurring in some areas it is imperative that the wider community understand that various data sources are not showing widespread increases in levels of use and more importantly that families and individuals understand that there are effective forms of treatment available for those experiencing problems.

Accordingly the ANCD has produced an accompanying paper to the ATS Medications Report on the current forms of treatment available and contact points for assistance.

A full copy of the information sheet is available at: www.ancd.org.au

Exploring Child and Family Sensitive Practices in Drug & Alcohol Services

The ANCD commissioned the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA) to develop a comprehensive report on the current policy environment in relation to child and family sensitive practice in Australian alcohol and other drugs settings.

The report found that there is a high degree of support for the concept of child and family sensitive practice, but there is no clear mandate for the alcohol and drugs sector to address the parental roles of their clients and the needs of clients' children. All Australian states and territories have child and family sensitive practice-related policies in place. However, there appear to be few mechanisms to guide and inform the implementation and operation of these policies, and many were fragmented, inconsistent and incomplete.

Responsibility for the children of those attending alcohol and other drug services currently remains ambiguous and this impedes constructive and consistent responses across and within sectors.

Specific barriers were identified in relation to the provision of child and family sensitive services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and ensuring equitable and appropriate services for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, their children and families was identified as a priority issue.

Female clients also faced particular barriers in accessing child and family sensitive services. Many residential treatment services could not allow women to bring their children with them into treatment, resulting in forced separation from their families. Some female clients were also reluctant to enter treatment or disclose information about their children for fear of losing custody should child protection services be notified.

Non-government organizations (NGOs) were more likely to be involved in implementing child and family sensitive practice and it is important that the responsiveness and flexibility of the NGO sector to undertake innovative service provision are appropriately recognized and resourced.

A full copy of the report is available at: www.ancd.org.au

The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) has been the principal advisory body to Government on drug policy since 1998.

For further information on the content of this media release please contact Mr Gino Vumbaca, ANCD Executive Director on 0408-244-552