

From the Chair and Deputy Chair

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Major Brian Watters, Chairman of the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) today defended the Federal Government's National Illicit Drug Strategy and rejected the comments by Professor David Pennington of Victoria.

Professor Pennington this week attacked the Prime Minister's rejection of a heroin trial. He also said, "the prohibition regime has been associated with increasing crime and increasing flood of illicit drugs in the country."

Major Watters said the Professor Pennington more than most people in Australia, should be aware that the National Drug Policy is based not on prohibition but on harm minimisation.

"It is hard to understand why Professor Pennington continues to focus on 'the trial use of heroin in a rehabilitation context....,' Major Watters said.

"Heroin trials in other countries, most notably Switzerland, have clearly failed in their primary objective of rehabilitating participants to a drug free status. Similar outcomes occurred in both Britain and Sweden when such programs were introduced there.

"Figures recently released by Monash University's Accident Research Centre show that up to 10,000 people in Victoria hospitals are treated for drug overdoses each year. The surprising fact is revealed that the vast majority were admitted because overdosing on legal drugs, analgesics, alcohol, etc. Forty per cent of admissions were young people aged 15-29 years.

"By what logic can it be seriously proposed that the prescribed or controlled availability of heroin - a much more potentially dangerous substance - would result in a reduction in overdoses, when it has not been so for other legal drugs."

Major Watters said Professor Pennington was not enhancing informed discussion when he uses inaccurate and emotive terms such as "prohibition."

"Preliminary evaluations of the Swiss heroin trial recognised that access to housing, counseling and enhanced employment prospects were very significant factors in the improved well being of the trial participants.

"It is therefore correct of the Prime Minister to warn against simplistic, glib, one shot solutions such as simply supply heroin."

Major Watters said the Federal Government's recently released National Drug Strategic Framework, endorsed by all Australian Health Ministers, is the result of extensive community and professional consultation.

"It is multi-faceted strategy with the objective of reducing the problem of drugs in Australia. It includes reduction in demand through preventative education and enhanced treatment services; minimising the harm to those people in the cycle of addiction and reduction of the supply of drugs through enhanced police

resourcing," he said.

The Federal Police Commissioner and Deputy Chair of the ANCD, Mick Palmer, said today that the Federal Government's Tough on Drugs Strategy is the first occasion on which a comprehensive supply reduction strategy, supported by real funding, has ever been initiated in this country.

Major Watters added: "We know that we are facing a complex problem that will not be resolved by simplistic solutions.

"International experts have applauded the breadth and effectiveness of Australia's drug policies, in contrast to what has threatened to be an overwhelming international problem.

"It is unfortunate that Professor Pennington, an Australian expert, cannot give credit and applaud what is apparent to overseas experts and to recognise the immediate and long-term value of the Prime Minister's promotion and resourcing of a comprehensive new initiative - Tough on Drugs."

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Metropolitan Motor Inn, Spring Hill, Qld where Major Watters is attending a drug conference today (Sunday)