


## Getting back ahead of the curve - 6 September 2011

Australia has a deserved international reputation as a leader in the drugs, alcohol, tobacco and HIV fields. 

Our ability to reduce the harmful impact of drugs and HIV and hepatitis C is well documented. Our rapid take up of needle and syringe programs has not only kept HIV rates in Australia to some of the lowest in the world; it has also led to more drug users in treatment. The bi-partisan support which many of these policies have received is a proud achievement.

The problems drug and alcohol use can create will always be with us. The recent release of 2010 data from the National Household Survey on Drug Use confirms this situation but also delivers some findings that demand vigilance.

Clearly, the recent attention given to alcohol is well founded with the staggering figure of almost 30% of people aged over 14 in Australia people reporting they have been victims of alcohol related violence, threatening behaviour or abuse. Quite literally, there are millions of people in this country being badly affected by someone else's drinking.

The Survey has also confirmed the increasing non-medical use of pharmaceutical pain killers. We need innovative and appropriate policies and programs to reduce the dangerous use of these drugs without compromising their legitimate medical use.

The increased use of illicit drugs for the first time in more than a decade also requires a careful and thoughtful response. The biggest increases in illicit drug use in the past 3 years have been in cocaine, cannabis, and hallucinogens. This should jolt us out of our complacency.

Getting funding increases of the required magnitude for new innovative treatment is not easy. This is where the role of the corporate sector and different public funding models are vital. Raising funds from the companies that benefit most from reduced drug and alcohol use, such as insurance companies, is one area we need to explore. To this we add funding from the industries that benefit from the use of drugs and alcohol. The alcohol industry is by far the best example. The cost of alcohol misuse in the community was recently estimated at \$36 billion a year. Surely it would be reasonable to expect the alcohol industry to provide funds for the treatment and rehabilitation of those who have become dependent. This would not only be good for the message it sends to the public about taking responsibility but also a very practical step in reducing harm.

Similarly, we need to develop funding vehicles, where not-for-profit services that serve the community by reducing drug, alcohol and related problems are rewarded with access to funding that is saved in other parts of the health or criminal justice systems. A model to reverse the ever increasing funding for prisons, which are a poor and costly solution for the problems caused by drugs and alcohol, into the more effective prevention and treatment system is critical in a world of scarce public resources.

Leadership is never easy in these areas but our history clearly shows that Australia is more than capable of leading. It will take courage and conviction to keep ourselves ahead of the drug curve but the benefits for many families and people, including children, will be great.

*Dr John Herron is Chairman of the Australian National Council on Drugs and has recently been reappointed by the Prime Minister for a new 3year term.*