

National Council backs investment on needle programs

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The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) today co-launched a seminal report that details the level of investment and return from needle and syringe programs (NSPs) over the past 10 years.

Major Brian Watters, Chairman of the ANCD and Mr Chris Puplick, Chairman of the Australian National Council of AIDS and Hepatitis Related Diseases (ANCAHRD) revealed that the report, funded through the National Tough on Drugs Strategy, highlighted that between 1990 and 2000 there has been nearly \$150 million invested in NSPs in Australia, resulting in:

- An estimated 25,000 cases of HIV being avoided
- An estimated 21,000 cases of hepatitis C being avoided
- An estimated saving of over 5,000 lives by 2010

In effect, the investment of almost \$150 million had resulted in an estimated return of somewhere between \$2.4 and \$7.7 billion.

Major Watters stated “the importance and value of NSPs has been more than demonstrated by the release of this report today. It is hoped that this will further enhance the public’s awareness of the purpose and value of NSPs and help in overcoming the misunderstanding that these programs somehow condone or encourage the injecting of illicit drugs - issues that were recognised by the ANCD when it released its Position Paper on needle and syringe programs late last year”

Major Watters added “on behalf of the ANCD I would also like to recommend the wider use of cost-benefit analyses in this sector - the better everyone can understand the real value and real returns for our community from investing in drug and alcohol and related programs, then the more likely the public are to support the further expansion of prevention and treatment programs in this country.”

The Executive Officer of the ANCD, Mr Gino Vumbaca also raised the issue of prison based NSPs when he said “the benefits to the community from NSPs are confirmed but they are clearly being undermined by a lack of progress in the prison system – the fact that needle sharing is a regular event in probably all our prisons is quite disturbing. Basically, it’s time for the prison authorities and staff to sit down and work out a way forward – the suggestion from ANCAHRD that retractable needle and syringes in a prison based NSP trial may address safety concerns deserves serious consideration.”

Major Watters concluded by restating a previous ANCD call to address public concern over discarded needles and syringes by replacing self-administration laws with laws designed to affect those responsible for inappropriate disposal of needles and syringes. Major Watters stated “we have to look at ways to encourage people into disposing of injecting equipment safely and properly, and if this means removing some laws that act as a disincentive then so be it – but we must see a real decrease in the number of used needles left in

public places.”

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

For further information, please contact:

Major Brian Watters (Chairman)

0400 780 509

Mr Gino Vumbaca (Executive Officer)

0408 244 552 or 02 6279 1650