

National Council meets with new Health Minister



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The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) has today held its first discussions with the new Federal Minister for Health, Senator Kay Patterson, at its meeting in Adelaide.

The ANCD welcomed both the Minister, and her recommitment of the Federal Government's pre-election announcement of a further \$110 million for drug and alcohol services, on top of the more than \$500 million previously provided.

Chairman of the ANCD, Major Brian Watters, said "The ANCD was pleased to be able to meet with the new Minister so soon after her appointment, and this further confirms the Federal Government's commitment to addressing drug and alcohol issues in the community. This additional funding, especially for local communities and drug and alcohol agencies to expand education, prevention and treatment services will make a difference. As I have said on a number of occasions, the concept that it should be easier for a person using drugs to get help than to get drugs is something we should be trying to make a reality."

Major Watters added, "The ANCD strongly supports these increases in funding, and is pleased that it continues to provide an opportunity for the non-government sector to be involved in the decision making process. However, the ANCD is concerned that a recent national survey appears to indicate that the level of treatment services provided in Australia has not actually risen for a number of years, despite the vast increase in funding available from the Federal Government. Whilst recognizing the limitations of a one day census the ANCD will be seeking some clear and unambiguous information from all governments about what treatment services currently exist and the level of funding that is being provided."

The ANCD has further noted that the additional Federal funding is for initiatives that focus on supply, demand and harm reduction, all of which need to be embraced by the community.

Major Watters concluded, "There has rightly been a lot of credit given to law enforcement agencies for reducing the availability of heroin and other illicit substances on the streets. However, it is critical that we capitalize on this uniquely Australian situation by ensuring there are treatment agencies ready to assist people in overcoming their addiction. We also need strong education and prevention programs in place to lessen the number of people having to deal with drug problems in the future. Making the community feel safe by reducing the harm to individuals involved in drug use, as well as those around them, is very important for a number of reasons. Unfortunately we will never be able to stop all people from using drugs, so for these people we must have programs to ensure the harm to the community, their family and themselves is minimized."

The Australian National Council on Drugs is the peak advisory body to Government on drug policy established by the Prime Minister in 1998.

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