

Parents of drug addicts need our help - 15 June 2011

Families of drug addicts are often ignored but they need support from the community



Politicians have invoked all types of families to push policies and programs, from the "working families" of 2007 to the "forgotten families" of 2010.

But there is a very large group that remain unrecognised: parents of children with drug problems.

Fearing further stigma many of them avoid assistance and support, unaware of just how many others find themselves in similar situations. They are often looked upon by society as failures when the reality can be very different.

In our work we come across families from across the spectrum of social and economic standing, each of them heartbroken and distraught that one of their children could have become a "drug addict". In some tragic cases it means dealing with the loss of a child from overdose and the unrelenting sadness that it brings.

While great and commendable strides have been made in tackling the stigma that confronts families dealing with mental illness and gambling problems, more focus should be placed on the needs of families living with drug-dependent children.

Eliciting widespread sympathy for families with problems that society often sees as self-inflicted or the direct result of bad parenting and weak character is far from easy. And the fact that by definition illicit drug dependency means directly engaging in criminal behaviour doesn't make the task any easier.

For families carrying the burden of drug dependency, the public and political debate often centres on the rhetoric of how to send the right message to young people. It's an empty argument for those families that are dealing with a death each day from a fatal drug overdose.

For many of these families they just want to know why this has happened to them, and, as is often the case, why their child had to die in a harsh, desperate and lonely place.

Of course there's no real answer as to why. As parents we try the best we can but that doesn't provide any guarantee. Any child from any family can become dependent on drugs.

It's also important to understand that not all kids who use drugs have problems, anymore than all people who drink alcohol are alcoholics.

However, what we don't have at the moment is a genuine debate about the support and help that people dependent on illicit drugs, and their families, need.

Drugs are different. Somehow decisions are not based solely on evidence; there is also a moral imperative to address. Even decisions on treatment are debated by those with little expertise. Can you ever imagine a media commentator or politician arguing with a clinician on the best type of treatment for someone with bipolar disorder, liver cancer or other health problems? Yet in the arena of drugs this is unfortunately seen as fair game.

Little wonder then that these families feel incredible shame and stigma.

Of course identifying the problem is one thing, finding the answers is something altogether different.

As a start, let's first acknowledge that drug use has and always will be with us. Let's acknowledge that it is a health problem and treat it like other health problems.

Let's invest in a whole range of treatments that the evidence tells us can work and make it as accessible as possible for people who want it – asking people with drug dependency problems to join a waiting list for help is just plain dumb.

If you think that drugs should continue to be a battle of ideology and morals then spend some time with families that did all they could as parents and still lost a child to drugs. Or conversely think of all the children living in families where parental drug use is problematic and ask either of them whether they care much about the what right message to send is.

One day we hope that political and community support for families dealing with drug problems will be as strong as that provided for families dealing with mental illness and gambling.

Drug dependency needs to be taken out of the shadows with new and innovative investments in support, treatment and help as soon as possible.

Gino Vumbaca is the Executive Director of the Australian National Council on Drugs and Tony Trimmingham is the Founder and Chief Executive of Family Drug Support and lost a son to a heroin overdose in 1997.

This article appeared in the Sydney Morning Herald on 15 June 2013.