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Special ACT ATOD Sector eBulletin: Overdose Awareness Day

Overdose Awareness Day: 31 August 2010

In This Edition...

Overdose Awareness Day

Information about Overdose Awareness Day, a day to acknowledge individual loss and family grief when loved ones have suffered overdose.

Dear Friends,

Today, 31 August 2010, is Overdose Awareness Day.

Today we remember those who have died from having suffered overdose as well as those who live with permanent injuries from overdose.

The Overdose Awareness Day silver badge signifies the profound loss of someone cherished and to show our understanding or to offer condolences to those bearing the burden of grief, or, indeed, to signify their own grief.

The badge is a symbol that puts different views and presumptions aside to commemorate the complexity of life and to remember the joy that was given by those who have been lost.

Our community has recently been touched again by overdose and a wake is being held this afternoon for a long time volunteer of our sector.

We extend our deepest condolences to those recently touched by overdose and those who continue to be touched by overdose.

Each year in spring in Canberra we gather together to remember those who have lost their lives to illicit drugs at a Remembrance Ceremony organised by Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (www.ffdlr.org.au/memorial/memorial.htm) at Weston Park.

Aims of Overdose Awareness Day

Overdose Awareness Day has a number of aims, including:

- It hopes to lay bare the stigma associated with drug use.
- To include overdoses that are heroin related, but also overdoses from alcohol, pills and other drugs. The inclusion of all drugs is important and more reflective of the reality of overdose, allowing us to speak more broadly about the issues.
- To include the greatest number of people in Overdose Awareness Day events, and as such, encourages non-denominational involvement.
- To give community members information about the issue of overdose.

- To send a strong message to current and former drug users that they are valued.
- To stimulate discussion about overdose prevention and drug policy.
- To provide basic information on the range of support services that exist in the local community.
- To remind the drug user to be careful.

Further information regarding Overdose Awareness Day can be found through the Salvation Army www.salvationarmy.org.au/contactus/victoria-divisions/crisis-services/overdose-awareness-day.html

Support Services

Canberra and the surrounding region have a range of support services for all people touched by overdose. Details can be found in the ACT Alcohol Tobacco and Other Drug Services Directory

(www.aodsector.org.au/public/activities/documents/AODV5DirectoryFinal.pdf)

The Alcohol and Drug Program, ACT Health can be contacted 24 hours a day on 6207 9977.

Family Drug Support 24 hour support line 1300 368 186

Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform on (02) 6254 2961 or mcconnell@ffdlr.org.au

Lifeline can also be contacted 24 hours a day on 13 11 14.

The Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy can be contacted on (02) 6279 1670.

Visit the Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League's (AIVL) website for information about overdose prevention (www.aivl.org.au/files/FactSheet-OverdoseAndPoliceAttendance.pdf)

Overdose information from the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA)

The Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy (CAHMA) has provided some helpful information regarding overdose:

- In the case of an overdose, Ambulance services can be contacted on 000. In most scenarios if the ambulance is contacted the police will not be contacted as per the guidelines outlined in the following document www.aivl.org.au/files/FactSheet-OverdoseAndPoliceAttendance.pdf
- Drug users should not use alone and should not mix drugs (for example do not mix heroin and alcohol as they are both central nervous system depressants).

- Overdose related deaths rarely happen instantaneously - more often than not they will take from 10 – 20 minutes (or hours). This allows time for intervention.
- Of all heroin related overdoses, only 10% are a result of using just heroin. The remaining 90% are as a result of poly drug use (using two or more drugs at the same time).
- People leaving prison, withdrawal services or rehabilitation services are at much higher risk of overdose death.
- The peer distribution of naloxone (narcant) could save lives if it was available. The ACT is currently looking into peer distribution of naloxone, and the Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy recently put a proposal to ACT Health about this issue.

Canberra Remembrance Ceremony: 18 October 2010

The following is a message from Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform regarding the upcoming Canberra Remembrance Ceremony and some background on how the ceremony came to be.

The idea of a time to remember those family members who had died because of the implications of drugs first arose at a Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (FFDLR) meeting in 1996.

A young member who had recently lost her brother told us about her idea of a memorial tree:

"The idea for this tree came to me some time after my brother's death, when I was standing talking to my mother in the kitchen. I looked out of the window at our home and became conscious of the old locust tree under which my brother would often sit. And my eyes were drawn to the large vicious thorns which cover this tree. It was still winter and the tree was bare, and I thought how symbolic the thorns were of his drug use. They are sharp, cruel and dangerous reminding me of the harsh reality of his efforts to get control of his life, and the way in which the community treats people who become dependant on drugs.

However, my mind wandered further from these difficult memories, and I was compelled to remember the true beauty of the tree. Every year I have looked with admiration at the tree when in spring it is covered in blossoms. Large clumps of sweet smelling, white flowers cascade from its branches. The flowers attract numerous varieties of parrots, which eat the nectar then drop the petals forming a magnificent white carpet beneath the tree. It is a beautiful sight. I was moved to think, yes look at this wonderful tree and remember it in its entirety. Remember my brother in his entirety, all the good things about him, all his good points for he was an individual with many assets and we loved him, as you will have loved your family member or friend."

This led members of FFDLR to look for a similar tree, which we found in Weston Park. With the help of many people, including the ACT Government, we were able to place a large rock with a memorial plaque under the tree and the official unveiling of the plaque by

the then Chief Minister of the ACT, Kate Carnell. And the first Remembrance Ceremony took place on 16th December, 1996.

It is important to the many families who attend this ceremony annually that it remains a spring ceremony. Spring is the time the tree is in blossom and the weather is more favorable.

It is called Remembrance Ceremony 'for those who lose their lives to illicit drugs' deliberately. We use the present tense because the loss is ongoing.

FFDLR felt that a memorial would help break a silence of prejudice and ignorance that has left many to bear their grief in isolation and shame. Some felt anger at the lack of help, at the pressures to abandon those we loved. There were also strong feelings that the death of most if not all those for whom we mourn should have been avoided. They met their death not so much from any inherent danger of the drugs involved but from policies and practices that shrouded the composition of the drug and forced on many the life of an outcast.

The Ceremony is attended by around 100 people each year – family members, friends, concerned people from the community. Names of more than 100 people to be remembered are read out. It is a very moving ceremony and appreciated by those who attend. It also helps raise awareness about the need for better drug policies.

The Ceremony this year will be held on Monday 18th October, 12.30pm at the memorial site, Weston Park, Yarralumla, ACT. Speakers include:

- Reverend Rex Graham, Social Justice Consultant, UnitingCare
- Senator Rachel Siewert, Australian Greens
- Music will be by "The Cashews".

Enquiries to Marion or Brian McConnell, FFDLR, (02) 6254 2961.

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