

United front on tackling heroin overdoses

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Today the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD) launched its specially commissioned report on heroin overdoses, as well as some critical policy advice for all governments in targeting heroin overdoses. The launch was supported by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) and the Australian Intravenous League (AIVL).

Major Brian Watters, Chairman of the ANCD stated:

"The continued loss of life from heroin related overdoses is a tragedy for not only the friends and families of drug users but for the whole community. The ANCD has sought the advice and support of both the research and drug using communities to assist in reducing overdoses. The NDARC report commissioned by the ANCD, clearly shows that a range of factors contribute to heroin overdoses and the ANCD has responded by releasing some specific advice on areas to be targeted. An underlying principle of any strategy must however acknowledge the important role that peer based education and organizations have in reaching the people most at risk of overdose. For this reason the support of AIVL for these ANCD sponsored strategies is very welcome."

Professor Margaret Hamilton, Director of Turning Point (Victoria) and Executive Member of the ANCD and Professor Wayne Hall, Executive Director of NDARC added:

"It is important that we keep these young Australians alive. Although most of them have been using heroin for some time, evidence does show us that they do not want to die. There will not be one single intervention that will stop these deaths, however partial success from a number of interventions can add up to make the significant difference we need."

In response to claims that a heroin drought caused by the success of supply reduction initiatives has led to a reduction of overdoses in Australia, the new Australian Federal Police Commissioner and Deputy Chair of the ANCD, Mick Keelty, stated:

"The success of Australian law enforcement in reducing the amount of illicit drugs on the streets, and in particular heroin, has been quite dramatic. Whilst we welcome the subsequent reduction in overdose deaths caused by this heroin shortage, we also know that any sustainable change to drug use and the harms it causes, must be accompanied by a strong commitment to reducing demand for drugs through better prevention, education and rehabilitation services."

Ms Annie Madden, Executive Officer of AIVL added that:

"While AIVL always welcomes reductions in heroin-related overdoses, we are also very concerned about the negative impacts that can be associated with sudden reductions in the supply of illicit drugs, such as heroin. It is important that people realise that the recent shortage has also caused widespread desperation, increased crime and violence and the potential for even greater overdose rates than before due to lowered tolerances to the drug. If recent reports from our networks stating that heroin supplies are returning to previous levels in

many areas are correct, then we could well see a spate of overdoses soon. This situation highlights that if we are to eliminate heroin-related overdoses, our best chance of success lies with a multi-faceted, co-operative and most importantly, sustainable approach."

In launching the reports, Major Brian Watters, Professor Margaret Hamilton, Professor Wayne Hall and Ms Annie Madden stated that:

"We acknowledge that heroin overdoses, just like the wider issues in the drug and alcohol debate, are a complex and difficult problem for the community to deal with, and there is simply no single answer. Basically, every government must undertake to try different and sometimes bold approaches, such as making naloxone more available and targeting specific and appropriate programs to those at a far greater risk of overdose, such as people relapsing after treatment, prisoners about to be released, the homeless and those with mental health problems. The support of the public for the introduction of innovative and possibly difficult approaches is also necessary if a real change is going to be possible."

Mr Gino Vumbaca, Executive Officer of the ANCD added:

"Some of the programs and policies being promoted today require a co-ordinated government approach and a genuine commitment from all governments and their departments to target those most at risk. The people launching these papers and policies represent a wide spectrum of views and approaches, the fact that they can come together for this provides an important path for all governments and communities. We are hoping a more informed public discussion and understanding on drugs will also follow."

The report on heroin overdose (prevalence, correlates, consequences and interventions) and the ANCD position papers on naloxone (narcane) availability and high risk groups are to be sent to the all Federal, State and Territory ministers with responsibility for drug policy and programs.

15 June 2001

The Australian National Council on Drugs is the peak advisory body to Government on drug policy established by the Prime Minister in 1998. (www.ancd.org.au)

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A three-page fact sheet on these reports is available on request: phone 02 6279 1650