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## 360Edge submission to inquiry into public communications campaigns targeting drug and substance abuse

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the inquiry into public communications campaigns targeting drug and substance abuse

360Edge is Australia's leading specialist alcohol and other drug consultancy, combining decades of academic research and clinical experience to provide effective evidence-based solutions to alcohol and drug related policy and responses.

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Professor Nicole Lee is an international leader in alcohol and other drug responses with 30 years' experience in the sector. She is Adjunct Professor at the National Drug Research Centre and a member of the Australian National Council on alcohol and other Drugs (ANACAD).

Of particular relevance to this inquiry, 360Edge has comprehensive experience in evaluating alcohol and other drugs education campaigns.

### Harm reduction as priority

Australia is currently experiencing a pattern of decreasing illicit drug use but increasing illicit drug harms.

While the inquiry is focused on demand reduction as a priority, it is imperative that harm reduction is also given adequate attention. The reality is that a small percentage of the population will continue to use drugs regardless of their legal status or risk of harm.

Drugs are only a problem because of the harms they cause. There is no imperative to restrict some drugs and allow others (eg alcohol). Therefore, there should be a strong focus on reducing harms.

Harm reduction messages are suitable for mass media campaigns. For example, mass media campaigns for the reduction of alcohol-impaired driving and alcohol-related crashes have been effective.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yadav, R., Kobayashi, M. A systematic review: effectiveness of mass media campaigns for reducing alcohol-impaired driving and alcohol-related crashes. BMC Public Health 15, 857 (2015) doi:10.1186/s12889-015-2088-4



A new campaign in Norway launched late last year by not-for-profit Rusopplysningen is yet to be evaluated but demonstrates potential harm reduction messaging for mass media.

Images can be viewed at: <https://designyoutrust.com/2019/12/knowledge-can-save-lives-new-harm-reduction-campaign-launched-in-norway/>

## **Evidence for public communications campaigns to reduce demand**

The effectiveness of mass media campaigns as a means to reduce illicit drug demand amongst the population is not well established.<sup>2</sup> This is largely due to poorly designed evaluations of mass media campaigns and the relatively rare occasion campaigns are effectively evaluated.

### **Learnings from quit tobacco campaigns**

A 2014 review by Wakefield et al<sup>3</sup> found that the long-term mass media campaigns targeted at tobacco have been effective. However, withdrawal of campaigns is correlated with a decline in effect, suggesting a consistent and sustained effort is required for impact.

In addition, these campaigns have been accompanied by improvements in treatment technology and access, as well as a range of policy interventions to reduce product access, especially to young people.

Reductions in smoking have occurred primarily as a result of young people not taking up smoking and the quit rates among existing smokers are more limited. In addition, campaigns do not appear to have had a substantial impact on people from vulnerable and lower socioeconomic groups, such as those with alcohol and other drug problems, or mental health issues, where smoking rates remain alarmingly high.

In addition, as the prevalence of smoking is now quite low, the campaigns seem to be having a diminishing effect.

These results suggest that for mass media to be effective in demand reduction, a long term investment is required, accompanied by other policy measures.

Moreover, low prevalence disorders may not benefit from mass media campaigns as much as issues that affect a large proportion of the community. They also demonstrate that despite a sustained effort, elimination of tobacco use has not been achieved, further emphasising the need for a harm reduction approach.

### **Evidence for use of mass media to reduce demand for alcohol and other drugs**

In relation to alcohol, there is little evidence that mass media campaigns have reduced alcohol consumption.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ilara E, Ferri M, Bo A, et al Are mass-media campaigns effective in preventing drug use? A Cochrane systematic review and meta-analysis *BMJ Open* 2015;5:e007449. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2014-007449

<sup>3</sup> www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4248563/

<sup>4</sup> Ben Young, Sarah Lewis, Srinivasa Vittal Katikireddi, Linda Bauld, Martine Stead, Kathryn Angus, Mhairi Campbell, Shona Hilton, James Thomas, Kate Hinds, Adela Ashie, Tessa Langley, Effectiveness of Mass Media Campaigns to Reduce Alcohol Consumption and Harm: A Systematic Review, *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, Volume 53, Issue 3, May 2018, Pages 302–316,



In relation to illicit drugs, two examples of effective approaches are the *Above The Influence* and *Be Under Your Own Influence* media campaigns by the US Office of National Drug Control Policy aimed at youth between the ages of 14 and 16.

Evaluations of both programs have found to correlate with reduced cannabis usage.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the *Above the Influence* campaign has been associated with greater anti-drug beliefs and fewer drug use intentions.<sup>6</sup>

These campaigns promote non-use of drugs as a means to support goals of autonomy and achievement. With key messages of rising above peer and social pressures to use drugs.<sup>7</sup>

There has been very little work evaluating illicit drug campaigns and the evaluations that have been undertaken show very mixed results. Some campaigns show modest reductions in use among the target population but many show increased interest and use.

The use of 'scare tactics' which exaggerate the harms caused by illicit drug use have been proven to be ineffective.<sup>8</sup> Fatal overdoses, dependence and other negative outcomes of recreational illicit drug use are relatively rare. When the general population (particularly young people) receive messages suggesting all drug use is dangerous it does not correlate with their experience and they are likely to disengage.

Paradoxically, describing drugs as "deadly" or "dangerous" can actually make them more appealing. A 2007 study of media reports and public health messages warning of a spike in heroin overdoses, found that for some people who use the message had the effect of encouraging them to seek out the more potent product.<sup>9</sup>

When it comes to young people, normalising non-use of alcohol and other drugs appears to be more effective than highlighting the dangers of use. Media campaigns which imply illicit drug use is more prevalent than reality or 'on the rise' can make young people more likely to use.

The 'My Anti Drug' media campaign by the US Office of National Drug Control Policy was based on a social marketing approach which emphasised resistance skills, self-efficacy, normative education and negative consequences of drug use.<sup>10</sup> However, these factors are suspected to have increased the perception of prevalence of drug use in the target population and were correlated with an uptick in cannabis use.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Scheier, L. M., Grenard, J. L., & Holtz, K. D. (2011). An empirical assessment of the "Above the Influence" advertising campaign. *Journal of Drug Education*, 41(4), 431-461.

<sup>6</sup> Scheier, L. M., Grenard, J. L., & Holtz, K. D. (2011). An empirical assessment of the "Above the Influence" advertising campaign. *Journal of Drug Education*, 41(4), 431-461.

<sup>7</sup> See: <https://abovetheinfluence.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Ilara E, Ferri M, Bo A, et al. Are mass-media campaigns effective in preventing drug use? A Cochrane systematic review and meta-analysis. *BMJ Open* 2015;5:e007449. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2014-007449

<sup>9</sup> Miller, P. G. (2007). Media reports of heroin overdose spates: Public health messages, moral panics or risk advertisements? *Critical Public Health*, 17(2), 113-121.

<sup>10</sup> Hornik R, Jacobsohn L, Orwin R, et al. Effects of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign on youths. *Am J Public Health* 2008;98:2229-36

<sup>11</sup> Hornik R, Jacobsohn L. The best laid plans: disappointments of the National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign. *LDI Issue Brief* 2008;14:1-4



Overall, effective drug education campaigns for young people should:<sup>12</sup>

- use interactive methods
- are delivered by trained facilitators
- are delivered through a series of structured sessions, often with refreshers
- normalise the non-use of alcohol and other drugs
- impact perceptions of risk associated with substance use
- provide opportunities to practise and learn personal and social skills.

### Effective evaluation of the effectiveness of campaigns

Mass media campaigns are rarely evaluated well making it difficult to inform policy development. A recent Cochrane review recommended that new campaigns should be implemented in the framework of rigorous evaluation studies, ideally in field settings with cohort or ITS study designs.

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Exposure to campaigns is only one possible outcome measure and does not necessarily mean they have had an impact. Likewise, asking if those exposed intend to change their behaviour does not necessarily mean that actual behaviour change will follow.

Evaluation needs to go beyond merely asking the target population whether they have seen a campaign and whether they intend to change their behaviour.

Actual behaviour change and other impacts must be measured, as well as possible unintended consequences (such as increases in use).

Evaluation of a mass media campaigns is more difficult than some other behaviour change research because there are any number of confounding environmental variables impacting on outcomes, including changes in policy during the campaign period. Adequate time and funding is required to properly examine the true effectiveness of mass media campaigns.

360Edge is grateful for the opportunity to comment on these issues and is available for further consultation in the development of a public communications campaign and its evaluation if required.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Nicole Lee  
*Director at 360Edge*  
*Adjunct Professor at the National Drug Research Institute*

<sup>12</sup> UNODC, 'International Standards on Drug Use Prevention' (2015) available online at: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/prevention/UNODC\\_2013\\_2015\\_international\\_standards\\_on\\_drug\\_use\\_prevention\\_E.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/prevention/UNODC_2013_2015_international_standards_on_drug_use_prevention_E.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Ilara E, Ferri M, Bo A, et al Are mass-media campaigns effective in preventing drug use? A Cochrane systematic review and meta-analysis BMJ Open 2015;5:e007449. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2014-007449

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