

Introduction

- 1.1 This discussion paper attempts to present an overview of what we believe is happening in relation to substance abuse in Australia. As a Committee we have been bipartisan in describing the work of government and nongovernment agencies, and in reporting many of the issues raised by the evidence given in submissions, public hearings, and innumerable visits throughout Australia.
- 1.2 We have much more work to do before we are ready to make definitive recommendations. We anticipate the Committee's future work will be complemented by more detailed information about the spread of services, the expenditures of governments, as well as more current estimates of the social and economic costs associated with substance abuse. This latter information, for example, is expected to be available by mid-2002.
- 1.3 This paper should be considered as the outcome of the first phase of this Inquiry. We intend the next phase to entail a more focused investigation of national programming and to result in recommendations about how our strategic approach to this subject might be made not only more effective and efficient, but how it might better engage the community in the design and support of its recommendations.

- 1.4 The Committee believes the involvement of communities in the development of workable recommendations and programs is vitally important. As one witness said:
- ... one of the important things is to actually take the community with us on the journey of understanding, exploration and dialogue.¹
- 1.5 We believe that community involvement is essential. We understand these processes can be difficult and expose conflict, but there is a real diversity of opinion on these matters which we can ill afford to ignore, or deny.
- 1.6 Committee members reflect a diversity of opinion but also have a special responsibility to bring to this debate all the spirit of bipartisanship we can muster. Throughout this Inquiry there have been many calls for the demonstration of leadership in this area. Sometimes, this was a call for the demonstration of more leadership from the Commonwealth, but more often it was a call for the demonstration of more leadership from parliamentarians.
- 1.7 The community demands that, above all, Members of Parliament adopt a bipartisan approach to this issue. As one witness said to the Committee:
- That is why people are so disenchanted with politicians: they actually think that politicians should be better than us, not the same as us. They should not be following opinion polls; they should be leading the way forward, not sliding backwards.²
- 1.8 The Committee is unanimous in the view that the issues, views, and possible directions raised in this discussion paper should be contemplated and discussed by all who are interested and involved in this complex area.

1 Evidence, p. 494.

2 Evidence, p. 798.