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AUTHORISED:

Inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families

Terms of reference

1. the financial, social and personal cost to families who have member(s) using illicit drugs, including the impact of drug induced psychoses or other mental disorders

The discovery that a family member is using illicit drugs is devastating.
The baby that you have nurtured from birth, the child who has represented her state in sport, the student who has successfully completed Year 12 and a TAFE course, the young adult who has succeeded in obtaining every job for which she has been interviewed surely could not be a drug user - but this is our story.
In the early stages, the emotional roller-coaster that we rode was horrific. Socially and personally I felt extremely isolated and at one stage I was very fearful for my daughter's life after having found her in her bedroom suffering severe effects of methamphetamine (ice) usage - difficulty breathing, heart palpitations and headache.
My husband was distraught and desperately wanted to 'fix' our daughter's drug problem. Our son wanted to leave home to get away from his sister's extreme mood swings, her lies and our then chaotic lifestyle. I stopped working so that I was around more 'to keep an eye on her.'
There was most definitely a financial, social and personal cost to our family.

2. the impact of harm minimisation programs on families

Harm minimisation is of the utmost importance. Drug users cannot 'simply stop' using and while I most certainly do not condone drug use it is important to keep users as healthy as possible until they are ready to take back their lives.
Clean needle programs are essential to keep IV drug users free from blood borne diseases - hepatitis and HIV. Injecting rooms are supervised and clean and will help keep users safe. Controlled drug use and treatment programs lessen the harmful effects of drugs.
Drug users are someone's son or daughter, brother or sister, possibly someone's mother or father. They are real people, not just statistics.
Harm minimisation from our experience included ensuring our daughter had accurate information from Drug and Alcohol Services and Family Drug Support. We tried to encourage a good diet, vitamin supplements, responsible usage - do not use alone, do not use drugs and drive. We were not condoning her drug use - we were trying to keep her alive and as healthy as possible, to encourage her to make responsible decisions, to accept the consequences of her actions and to manage her drug use by cutting down on the amount and frequency of her use.

3. ways to strengthen families who are coping with a member(s) using illicit drugs

Families need support and accurate information. Without knowledge and understanding of drug use, families can unintentionally make matters worse.
I was very fortunate to make contact with Drug and Alcohol Services and Family Drug Support (FDS) very early.
Support meetings with other parents and a facilitator was critical for my own well being. Meetings provided an opportunity to learn strategies for coping with my own emotions as well as learning to support my daughter.
I learned to accept without approving, to support without rescuing, to implement harm minimisation strategies, to understand without condoning her behaviour, to listen and be patient and available, to encourage positive steps, to minimise confrontation, to set realistic boundaries with realistic consequences.
I am sure our family would not have survived as well as it has without the assistance of FDS, and I am sure our daughter's progress would not have been so positive if we had not been so well supported in supporting her.