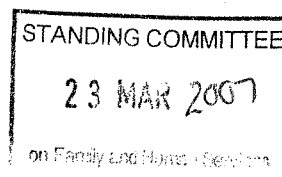


March 21, 2007



Submission No: 70

Supp to Sub:

AUTHORISED:

9/5/07

KS

Dear Sir or Madam:

I am pleased to be able to make this submission to the Inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families. This submission responds to each terms of reference in order.

Please note that I make this submission as an individual and as this submission contains information about my family please do not publish my name or any other identifying material on the website.

Terms of Reference

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

From my own experience of having a sibling with a substance misuse problem and an associated dual diagnosis I have seen that the financial costs include theft of money, valuable items (both monetary and sentimental) around the family home. Money also spent on posting bail, legal costs, taking over the drug users bills/fines, giving money to the drug user as they have been threatened (either real or unreal however it is a constant pressure to 'loan' money to the user) and loss of business property. My brother also has damaged property in drug induced rages and psychoses. The family home was trashed and furniture sold while my mother was overseas. This caused a lot of financial difficulty for my family.

The average point of views of the general public towards drug users and their families is quite harsh. The family is seen as being responsible for the situation and this feeling is conveyed onto an already pressurised environment.

As a result social costs include parents losing contact with some friends due to the constant strain. Usually people who have had no experience of a similar situation find it hard to understand the catch 22 the family is in. Statements like 'just kick him out' or 'he'll wake up when he reaches rock bottom' do not help. Quite frankly, *no one* knows where rock bottom is for any individual. One also notices that after a while that people just don't want to know about it anymore – it's just too much for them. Usually drug problems last for a long period of time which people (in the family and out of it) find hard to cope with.

As a teenager with a drug affected brother I was definitely restricted to certain activities, for example the ability of having friends to socialise at my home was restricted due to my brother's behaviour.

It is almost inevitable that the drug user will come into contact with the criminal justice system. This impacts on the family as well. My brother had also been charged with many incidents due to trying to obtain money for his next fix. After a number of terms in juvenile detention centres he then made his way into the adult gaol system. Visiting my brother on Christmas Days or any other time was just horrid. He also was arrested the Easter weekend my father died. Due to the long weekend we couldn't get him to the funeral service but he was able to attend the burial (with handcuffs on). This was obviously distressing for the whole family.

Personal costs have been abundant in all family members. Some of the repercussions are still only emerging. There was no counselling with practical solutions offered to me in the first 10 years of my brother's drug use. There was talking with people within the family group and the church community but not by anyone who would have some idea of the real situation or could provide professional or specialised help and support.

My parents' relationship was always under an amazing amount of strain. The consistent stress helped to mask my father's illness (Alzheimer's Disease) for a considerable time as everyone assumed his illness was 'stress related' due to my brother.

I continued with school and then university (and got through both) but had a lot of trouble dealing with study pressures on top of the family situation. I even moved interstate to 'get away' from the constant day to day struggle. This caused a rift in my relationship with my mother.

I also suffered sibling abuse as a child (age 11) and was unable to tell my parents because I was worried that I would cause even more problems in a highly stressed situation. This has been a huge personal cost to me that has taken much time to resolve. The constant strain on the family resulted in stress and anxiety on all members.

The family has also experienced violent rages and assaults from my brother. I witnessed my father being beaten up by my brother (resulting in the need for stitches), my mother was punched on this occasion and I was kicked hard enough to cause me back problems until this day. You can count this as a financial cost as well if you add up all the physiotherapy bills over the years. My brother has recently been diagnosed as Paranoid Schizophrenic with brain damage (not sure if permanent or not at this stage) from drug use.

There is no question that I have experienced and seen things that most never will. It has been a long (20 years) and fraught process.

2. the impact of harm minimisation programs on families; and

Harm minimisation does not condone the use of drugs. It aims to minimise harm to the drug user in their drug taking and as a result can help the family. Such

programmes as prescribed methadone and supervised injection rooms are an important part of harm minimisation and I support them.

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

Being told to just 'get over it' does not help families. It gives them even more of a feeling of failure when self-esteem is already low. Helpful and practical possibilities need to be given to families on this difficult journey.

Give the family support first! Encouragement and support to help them stay together (with or without the drug abuser) can help in the overall outcome of the drug users tough road. All family members are entitled to a reasonable life. To achieve this they need non-judgemental, comprehensive support.

Education is vital, not only for the family and the drug user, but also for the broader community. Much could have been prevented and dealt with if we had been fully educated on what possible drugs could be abused and their affect on the user. Programmes such as the Family Drug Support's meetings and 'Stepping Stones' course are absolutely invaluable.

Yours sincerely,