



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;
2. the impact of harm minimisation programs on families; and
3. ways to strengthen families who are coping with a member(s) using illicit drugs.

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My name is Margaret Quon of

I am the mother of three adult children. My youngest son 21 is currently doing his PhD at Monash University in microbiology, my daughter is 24 she is employed fulltime as an accounts manager with Shell Australia and completing her Honors part time in Business at La Trobe University. My eldest son is almost 27 he is a dispatch manager at a furniture factory.

I was once employed by Victorian Education department as a Senior policy officer in Drug Educator, contributing to curriculum development in drug education and addressing bullying in schools. I was the initiator of the parent education program for parents and students Talking Tactics Together.

I contributed to the development of the Strong Bonds project connecting families and young ones with the Jesuit services.

I am also a peer facilitator of a support group for families and friends who have a loved one whose life is affected by drugs and or alcohol. I recently received an award from Familydrughelp for my work to help change the stigma around families affected by drug use. The award was presented to me at Government House by the Governor of Victoria.

My eldest son has had drug and alcohol issues since commencing year seven, secondary school. My son reclaimed his life at age 24. Leading up to his decision to attempt detox my son had reached a point where he had to make a decision between life and death. At that time his drug use was leading him to death.

Heroin was his drug of addiction and he became careless in administering it, using so often in a day he would forget when he last used, resulting in over twenty overdoses in a twelve month period. Without the response of our ambulance service and the amazing care shown he would be dead. Narcan and compassion saved him.

On one particular day he overdosed three times with the same paramedic attending each time. The last time the paramedic attended he told my son that if another call came to attend the area he would not respond. {Of course he would have attended} but those words shifted something in my son that day and he began thinking and contemplating how he could stop his drug use. The long process began.

Heroin was the drug my son was addicted to, along with his love of the needle. My son also immersed himself in the dance and party scene using Ketamine, GBH, Ecstasy, Methamphetamine, amphetamine, and probably substances I have never heard of.

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Combined with this was the use of prescription drugs such as Xanax, valium, temazapan and serapax. At this point my son was dying in front of me. Through conflict about the drugs and the subsequent lifestyle including some criminal activity my son chose to live away from the family home. At the time we were relieved and grateful for the peace until eventually he was brought home by friends who could see his downward spiral and knew he needed to be cared for. He weighed 45 kgs, by now the father of a one year old son who I was helping to raise. The heartbreak of watching his toddler son try to rouse his dad as he lay drug riddled on the couch was too much to bear. My son would slowly raise his arm and tousle his son's hair, the deep love fighting against the grain of the addiction.

How has this drug use affected the family? As a unit it has kept us united as we are protective of each other because we have been socially isolated, judged and punished for one family members drug use. This unity is at times fragile and can be shattered when our interpretations of events collide. My younger children sometimes saw my behaviour towards my eldest son as permission for him to do as he pleased and treat us appallingly. I saw it as ensuring the least amount of harm to either him, me, them or the community.

Depending on the drug being used at the time my son could become aggressive, violent, threatening, impulsive or destructive. Amphetamines caused most violent outbursts and irrational behaviour, resulting in holes in the walls, broken windows, smashed belongings, wrecked cars, the younger ones homework and study destroyed, pacing through the house cursing while we waited either for him to calm down, which rarely happened or to explode.

To protect the younger children I had to take the brunt of that behaviour.

At times I called the police but their presence inflamed the situation often leaving us unsafe when they left. The dilemma is whether to have your child removed and in the hands of the police or to ride the storm. I am ashamed to say at these times I would give him money so he would leave, usually to get more drugs and when he had left I sometimes hoped he would never come back.

This threatening behaviour began when he was fourteen and had begun to use cannabis, a drug he grew to hate as in his words it made him feel paranoid, that people were after him, it is possible that people who he had crossed were after him, so I will never know if the cannabis had that effect on him or not.

My shame grew further when he was removed from school for having cannabis, yet the school was quite happy for him to be medicated with Ritalin.

During this time I realized I was losing my hopes and dreams for him, I had become despondent praying for peace at any price.

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I learnt to live with my fear. I was fearful he would die; he would be bashed, hurt in an accident, attacked by other drug users, jailed, bashed by police or just disappear. My body jarred with the sound of a siren, a news flash, a sudden thud until silence became a sign of death. {Overdose}

My grieving began. I grieved for his lost potential, his lost personality, his own peace, and my wants for him as a person. Constantly I have had to reevaluate my own values, I have let go of my need to have a house with walls intact, furniture that matches, and my own career and I have peeled back the layers to value the person, to value keeping him alive at all costs.

As a family the financial struggle has been difficult. Replacing damaged and stolen belongings has been ongoing for years; the younger ones went without text books, camps and excursions as the money was not there. I have been a widow since my youngest was born and the sole provider of all things. The cost of court costs, lawyers, and treatment took most of our money. As my son's behaviour and drug use escalated fewer family and friends came to visit our home or include us in social activities in case he came. We had little respite and on reflection as I write I can see my younger children locked themselves away in their rooms, no longer eating together as a family, no longer watching TV together or talking together. We would covet brief times together away from him to share school activities, illnesses, fear, loneliness or wonder where our belongings had gone to. Sometimes we would cry together, hug and just hope everything would change. For many years nothing changed except to worsen. The other drug users congregated at the house dismissing us, coming at all hours, leaving at all hours, some were school friends on the same path, some complete and frightening strangers. We were powerless in our own home, the police would advise me to tell them to leave. This I tried to their amusement.

I had a successful teaching career with the Victorian Education Department spanning thirty four years. I applied and successfully secured a position as a Regional Drug Education facilitator in the hope I could have some influence on drug education in schools and the manner in which schools treated young users and their families. I performed my duties at a high standard and was proud of what I was doing. The position gave me solace from the war at home. My son was involved with a girl he met at school, her father and brother teachers at the younger children's school. She too used amphetamines although at the time I was unaware of this. By now apparently both of them were injecting speed and selling it. I foolishly thought they were using cannabis and ignorantly thought they would grow out of it. These aspects of my own drug education were lacking. When they left the house at night I worried they had a gambling problem, how foolish again I felt when discovering this was not the case.

My son and the girlfriend had become so **violent** and had **abused** the younger children as well as smashed the house up. I called the police and they were removed with a lot of effort. They did not go easily and made many threatening remarks as they left with my family car. A price I had to pay for us to be safe. I did not see my son again for eight months, not knowing if he was alive or not. I received a phone call from Richmond police to say my car had been found dumped and they wondered if it had been stolen.

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In 2001 my youngest son had to have his chest reconstructed, a major surgery which was very painful. I slept on a chair at the hospital while my daughter drove back and forth from Geelong where she was now attending university to escape her older brother. During this dreadful week my own younger brother died from skin cancer, I would wait until my son was asleep in the hospital drive frantically to my brother's home, steal some time with him although he was no longer aware and then get back to the hospital to soothe my youngest. I was frazzled, worn out and shocked to see my son and his girlfriend at the funeral. The biggest shock was the appearance, thin, a strange pallor in their skin and then sadly watching others avoid them. He disappeared again.

I was behind with my work commitments and was required to travel all over the state delivering workshops to teachers on drug education and bullying in schools. My father looked after my youngest son as he needed care. When I returned from a trip to Hamilton my father insisted I take my youngest son straight to the doctor as he had deteriorated after the surgery. Later that day he had emergency cardiac surgery and I cried, exhausted, and torn in all directions.

My daughter was away from me, I hoped she was okay in her strange surroundings. She maintains a silence around herself so she was not likely to tell me how sad she was. I still had no idea where my eldest son was living, as a family we had disintegrated completely, I felt I had no support as my own extended family was consumed by grief with the loss of my brother; my father was not coping as mum had died a few years earlier and missed both of them.

My youngest slowly recovered, I worked long hours to catch up on my work, and my daughter gave up her university course at Geelong. I spent time caring for my father. My eldest son and his girlfriend moved back into the house without any discussion or consultation, they sectioned off their end and set themselves up. We lived separate lives, rarely speaking, the strain was awful. Again "friends" turned up and left, the phone rang constantly, until one night **the police raided the house.**

As a law abiding person I was terrified. The police treated myself and my younger children as criminals, we were abused for a five hour period while they pulled the house apart. We watched as my son lay handcuffed on the floor face down, we were not allowed to use the toilet unless we agreed to a body search which I refused to allow them to do to my younger children.

We were not allowed to answer the phone or let anyone know where we were. It was my father's birthday and we were expected at my sisters for tea. My father became sick believing we had had a car accident and were dead, I was dragged by two officers to a darkened shed and threatened, I was accused of being a drug dealer, and the police dogs scared my dogs and according to police reports obtained through FOI had consumed ecstasy concealed in my Government car!! Very happy but not well trained police dogs if this were truly the case.

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The police officers told me they had been watching my son and his girlfriend for months; I questioned why they didn't stop them earlier which didn't get a reply. The acting sergeant in charge of the raid from Ringwood screamed into my face "that his mate Bracksie would have a field day with **me making sure I lost everything starting with my job, my house and my kids.**"

Well that is the effect on families, we are judged by police officers such as who commenced a campaign against me. I lost my job with the Education Department based on his vitriol. The Education Department acted in a knee jerk manner writing me a letter advising me I was under investigation for drug related activities and was no longer employed. Again we were punished for being the family members of a drug user.

My son had not used heroin until the day I received that letter and he watched me collapse on the floor sobbing. I was the scapegoat for an expensive raid that did not produce the outcomes expected. My son received a suspended sentence as did the girlfriend but I lost a 34 year career, my health, my dignity, my confidence. I live with the shame that others believed the lies, that I had no recourse because the dialogue I constantly received was "well your son was using drugs" as though that was something I was happy about.

I made complaints to ESD of Vic Police regarding the treatment and threats made by the police officers towards myself and younger children. As a result I was harassed by the police, arriving at the house early in the morning banging on the windows with their batons and then leaving.

My son was dragged off the street and bashed with the warning "to tell your mother to keep her mouth shut." Families who are the innocent ones have no idea how to deal with this whole other world, of police abuse, we have nowhere to go to help us feel safe as the ones who are suppose to protect us are the ones harming us.

The situation is insidious. Devastated and tired from the battle with your child, heartbroken to think their drug use had led them down such a path and across the path of people they would never normally even know about and then to be accused of encouraging drug use, of turning a blind eye, then losing your job unfairly and being threatened by the police for many years. No charges have ever been laid against me because I have never done anything wrong but I have been **punished** for being the mother of a user.

I was also stunned to discover that my police files disappeared, with all the documents I had sought to show the behaviour of the police officers and to fight my case with the education department. As an ordinary citizen I could not believe these things happened. Families need an **independent Ombudsman role to listen and act on their behalf.**

My son's drug use escalated after I was treated so badly for what he had done. Heroin became his drug along with a new crowd. He began the club scene and all the drugs that went with that. New people came into his life, we became more isolated from him, he

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concealed his behaviour and drug use by living away from home. In this time he wrote off three cars and one, mine was stolen from Bass Station night club and found burnt out. He was bashed within inches of his life over drugs, a friend died from an overdose in the house he was renting; he tried to revive him and was distraught. By this time he needed help and I needed help but who helps you?

At this lowest point he had met a new girlfriend fraught with her own problems and rejected by her family. They had a child together which despite their drug and alcohol use they loved dearly and cared for well. They at least knew when they couldn't and I would have the baby stay with me. My daughter and I cared for him as we loved him and saw him as a gift out of all the chaos.

Over time the relationship broke up and my son was brought home in a mess. I tried to keep him alive by pouring water into his mouth and small pieces of food. It was difficult to be near him as he was filthy and non functioning.

At this point trying to get help was harder. My son was not capable of making an informed decision about anything even to go to the toilet; he wanted help, could not speak because of the drugs, slurred and dribbled. I rang agencies, detox centres but they would not help me, they told me they could only speak with him, I explained he couldn't speak. Families need to be able to **advocate on behalf of their drug affected child**. My son overdosed twice at home and we still could not get help.

My youngest son who is very gentle and loving said that" next time we would let him die." And wears a T-shirt stating **you may as well inject battery acid you dumb f.....** His only way of letting his brother know how he is feeling and his pain of watching this all happen to his big brother who he loves.

My daughter was traumatized. She found him gasping and twisted in pain dying in front of her. Level headed she called me, phoned 000 and helped try to revive him. No younger sister should have to revive their brother. Even after all these experiences we had no one to talk to. We were getting weaker.

The tide turned, my son went into detox several times, and then was prescribed bupe and slowly over many months into years he reclaimed his life. I am in awe of his determination having watched his pain through withdrawal, his loneliness, his flood of emotions and guilt, his embarrassment regarding his behaviour. I needed help to cope with this. I needed someone to come and put my house in order.

My beautiful grandson was with us most of this time; he loves his daddy and would stroke his hair and babble to daddy. The maternal grandparents although failing to help their own daughter offered to help look after my grandson while my son recovered and got his life back in order. We shared him 8days/6days a fortnight until my son rose and said he was now capable of raising him. My grandson disappeared; papers arrived served to my son from the maternal grandparents who had applied for full custody of my grandson. The court battle has been dirty filled with lies and of course the underlying drug use has been used to support their argument to raise him.

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The final outcome that despite his amazing recovery, being drug free, working full time, building bridges, growing again as a young man he lost his son and I **lost my grandson**, my daughter lost her most loved in the world nephew and my youngest son lost his prodigy to be the next scientist in the family.

Families need access to **financial assistance** to fight such decisions as by this point they are cash strapped and cannot fight those such as the maternal grandparents who have the finances to pay for lawyers and court costs. Sadly the young mum has been denied access to her son by her own parents. The difference between our two families is that I persevered with my son I refused to let him die and dreamt of the day he would find peace and happiness, they turned their back on their daughter putting her out of home at 16 and rarely letting her return. The journey is different.

What helped and we need more of

- ✧ Familydrughelp support groups for families-self help model with resources to support the families
- ✧ Access to resilience programs to help strengthen family members
- ✧ Education, knowledge with depth.—not only about the drugs but about legal procedures, health resources, agencies, courses
- ✧ Changing the stigma attached to families. Promote that drug use can happen to any family without blame to ensure social isolation and shame are things of the past.
- ✧ Financial assistance for families to regain their own lives.

Harm minimization that should be encouraged and continued

- ✧ Needle and syringe program—as a result of this my son is disease free.
- ✧ Treatment and Medication programs such as bupe program have given my son back his life
- ✧ Easy access to these treatment programs
- ✧ More flexible dispensing of the medications so employment can be undertaken.
- ✧ Make it unlawful for a person to be dismissed from employment for being on a treatment program. {while the person is employed self esteem and worth is enhanced plus the financial pressure is eased on the family}

Demand reduction

- ✧ Assistance to get employment
- ✧ Assistance to participate in relevant programs building self esteem, skills, resilience, skills to make choices based on knowledge.

- ✧ We need to examine the police role and educate them to shift their focus from punitive to a health model for drug users and their families.
- ✧ Police must know the difference between the user and his addiction and the dealers who are supplying large amounts.---and should approach in such a way.

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