

## The committee's inquiry

1.1 The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs of the 39<sup>th</sup> Parliament (1999-2001) (the former committee) started its inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities in the context of the National Drug Strategy. The situation in relation to drugs in Australia at that time was characterised by:

- a stable level of alcohol and tobacco consumption during the 1990s, with Australia ranked 19<sup>th</sup> in the world for per capita alcohol consumption and 17<sup>th</sup> for tobacco;
- men being more likely than women to smoke and drink regularly as well as hazardously;
- an increasing use of almost all illicit drugs, most of them from a very low base; and
- a shortage of heroin in 2000-01.<sup>1</sup>

1.2 On 30 March 2000 at the committee's request the then Minister for Health and Aged Care, the Hon Michael Wooldridge MP, referred the inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities to the House Family and Communities Affairs Committee with the following terms of reference:

In view of the rising level of community concern about the continuing abuse of licit and illicit drugs, the committee investigate and report on the social and economic costs of substance abuse with regard to:

- family relationships;

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1 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, *Where to next? - A discussion paper: Inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities*, FCA, Canberra, September 2001, pp 8-9, 74.

- health care costs;
  - crime, violence and law enforcement (including domestic violence);
  - road trauma; and
  - workplace safety and productivity.
- 1.3 The former committee received 222 written submissions from government agencies, non-government organisations and individuals. Between August 2000 and June 2001, it visited all the major capital cities and some regional centres where it held nine public hearings; it also spent an additional 21 days on private visits and consultations with communities around the country.
- 1.4 The outcome of the former committee's investigations was summarised in a discussion paper entitled *Where to next? – a discussion paper: Inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities*, that was tabled in the parliament in September 2001. The paper provided an overview of what was 'happening in relation to substance abuse in Australia'<sup>2</sup> but did not draw detailed conclusions nor make recommendations. The former committee advocated for the inquiry to be continued in the next parliament.
- 1.5 At the start of the present parliament on 12 February 2002, the situation in relation to substance abuse in Australia appeared to have changed relatively little since the former committee commenced its inquiry. Under these circumstances, the current committee, which was formed on 21 March 2002, decided that it needed to continue and complete this important work. It needed to finalise the review started by the former committee into the problems caused by substance abuse and recommend on the appropriateness of existing government policies and programs aimed at addressing these problems. The committee approached the Minister for Health and Ageing, Senator the Hon Kay Patterson, to refer to it the same terms of reference as the former committee had. This she did on 14 May 2002.
- 1.6 This committee sought not to duplicate the work of its predecessor. Rather its emphasis was on finishing the task. Accordingly, the committee carefully targeted the additional work that needed to be done. It gave previous submitters the opportunity to update their contributions to the inquiry, it only undertook visits to locations to inform new committee members and, where new treatments or information needed to be collected, it heard from leaders in the field and met with those who had new information to present. The committee:

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2 House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, *Where to next?*, p xv.

- examined a range of preventative techniques and treatments;
  - evaluated the success of rehabilitating substance abusers back into mainstream society;
  - examined the definition of harm minimisation and current practices associated with the term;
  - attempted to obtain a clear and precise account of where government funds were being spent; and
  - investigated the proliferation of research and assessment teams.
- 1.7 The present committee received 77 further submissions, held a two-day roundtable and a public hearing in Canberra, visited selected facilities and held necessary meetings in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney.
- 1.8 The appendices to this report provide information about the evidence collected for the inquiry by both the former and current committee.
- The submissions are listed in Appendix A.
  - The exhibits are listed in Appendix B.
  - Details of the public hearings, inspections, informal consultations and the roundtable can be found in Appendix C.
- 1.9 In the context of this report the term parent is taken to include those persons responsible for the care and upbringing of children.
- 1.10 The committee notes the wide discrepancies in the data available on many of the issues addressed in its report.

## **The committee's final report**

- 1.11 This report continues and finishes the work reported in the former committee's discussion paper. The report is broadly structured according to the inquiry terms of reference. Chapter 2 provides an overview of alcohol and drug harm in Australia and places Australia in an international context. Chapter 3 reviews the impacts of substance abuse on families and communities and the steps that should be taken to address these impacts. The next four chapters examine the demands placed on the health care system by substance misusers. Chapter 4 covers the general aspects of health care for substance misuse with the other chapters devoted to alcohol (Chapter 5), tobacco (Chapter 6) and the illicit drugs (Chapter 7). Chapters 8, 9 and 10 deal respectively with crime, violence and law enforcement; road trauma; and workplace safety and productivity. In the final chapter the committee discusses some general points about the

nation's drug policy and recommends on improvements for a better outcome in meeting the challenges of substance misuse in Australia.