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Submission to the inquiry into the effects of a family member's use of illicit drugs.

Our son was a heroin user over approximately 15 years, beginning in his early teens. During those years he managed periods of abstinence as well as some participation in Methadone programs. Sometimes though, he used every day and thanks to the harm minimization policy of ambulance officers was revived by them on at least three occasions when the dose he used was extra pure or different for some reason. The main effects on the family during this time were of social isolation, we did not feel able to reveal his problem to our friends or extended family. Our son suffered periods of depression which I believe predated his addiction. It seems to our family that the medically prescribed use of inhalers during childhood to prevent and treat asthma attacks may have contributed to his "self medication" (heroin use). However many of the health professionals he consulted treated him as a second class citizen and especially in the early times refused to consider his mental health needs. Many of the community help groups gave us the advice to cut our son off from the family until he stopped using, advice I still find extraordinary, I preferred to maintain as much contact as possible while offering emotional support and help to find solutions to the problem. The illicit nature of the problem gave us little room to move. After he began a relationship with a young woman who was also an illicit drug user the problems escalated. His partner used many different drugs and the family was always in need of money for food, rent, clothing for the children, petrol for the car etc. His partner had serious mental health issues which, combined with her drug use, resulted in neglect of her children and criminal activities leading to her arrest and imprisonment. From a financial standpoint, my husband and I will never recover from this time as we tried to look after the family and also our son's health. Our son re entered a Methadone program, is now in fulltime work and able to participate fully in the community, however the past discrimination and even abuse by some members of the welfare community have resulted in his feeling unable to seek to have his eight year old daughter live with him on a full time basis.

I believe that the illegal status of the substances used by so many people is the biggest threat to the wellbeing of the user and their family. Eliminating the black market should be the first step. Enabling the user to obtain these drugs in a controlled way that ensures the purity of the substances involved, and also puts the user in contact with mental health professionals in a non threatening environment, could eliminate many of the problems that are now associated with illicit drug use.

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