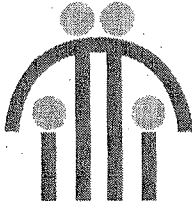


Submission No: 59

AUTHORISED: 28/3/2007 kj

THE AUSTRALIAN FAMILY ASSOCIATION

ABN 53441526057



582 Queensberry Street, North Melbourne, Victoria 3051
Tel: (03) 9326 5757 Fax: (03) 9328 2877

The Hon Bronwyn Bishop
Chairman
House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
fhs.reps@aps.gov.au

AUSTRALIAN FAMILY ASSOCIATION (NSW) SUBMISSION TO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES INQUIRY ON IMPACT OF DRUGS ON FAMILIES

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Family Association (AFA) NSW, being a grass roots organization of ordinary families from both metropolitan and regional NSW, is acutely aware through its members of the impact of illicit drug use, both on the individual users and their families and also on the wider community.

However, it is the view of the AFA that any inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families and society should, if it is to be truly useful, look at the whole genesis of the current drug problem – those changes in language, attitudes, pop culture, film, music, literature, public policy, law enforcement, family stability and so on, which have formed the backdrop that has given rise to such a high incidence of illicit drug use.

THE FINANCIAL, SOCIAL AND PERSONAL COST TO FAMILIES

Gut-wrenching stories abound of the huge personal cost that illicit drug use causes to individuals and families.

It is never just the drug user that suffers. The ripple effect across the whole of society is only too apparent.

One example springs to mind. Let us refer to them as family Z (refer to appendix)

Family Z have three adult children and two children still at school. Two of the adult children (B and C) were introduced to drugs ten or so years ago, while still at school. The father had a good position and was required to travel extensively. When it became apparent that B and C were using drugs (so-called "soft" drugs leading to heroin) he decided to leave his position and seek work that did not require him to travel, so that he could be on hand for his children.

FOUNDER: MR B.A. SANTAMARIA, M.A., LL.B.

PATRONS:

HON. K.E. BEAZLEY Senior, A.O., M.A. (Hons), Hon. D. Litt. (Sydney & WA.), LL.D. (A.N.U.)

PROF. J.L. CHIPMAN, M.A., Ph.D. (Oxon), LL.B.

REV. DR. J.I. FLEMING, B.A., Th.L. (Hons), Ph.D.

DR R. GOODMAN, A.M., B.A., B.Ed., Ph.D., F.A.C.E.

DR. C. ISBISTER, C.B.E., M.B., B.S., F.R.A.C.P.

MAJOR GENERAL W.B. "DIGGER" JAMES, A.C., A.O., M.B.E., M.C., M.B.B.S.(Syd), F.R.A.C.S.

DR. T.B. LYNCH, A.O., M.B., B.S., F.R.A.C.P.

DAME ELISABETH MURDOCH, A.C., D.B.E.

LADY SCHOLTENS.

JUDGE FRANK WALSH.

EMERITUS PROF. JERZY ZUBRZYCKI, A.O., C.B.E., M.B.E. (Mily.), F.A.S.S.A.

THE AUSTRALIAN FAMILY ASSOCIATION

The father remained unemployed for some time as he had a lot of difficulty gaining a position using his specialized skills. Eventually he took on work in a slightly different field. The family adjusted to this situation by drawing on savings and making personal sacrifices, without complaint.

B and C eventually got into separate drug rehab. / remand programs, but not before irreparable damage had been done to their health and they came to the attention of the police.

The mother claims that support for them to get their children into rehab. at an early stage was not forthcoming – their children were at the point where their very lives were at risk before help was available.

The mother also recalls the hurt and frustration at being effectively shut out of the rehabilitation process – that the parents were not permitted to participate in the decision-making process during rehab.

B had a baby while still heroin-addicted and so the baby suffered heroin withdrawal at birth. A second child has been born since her coming off heroin. B's mother and father have invested all their available time in the care and support of B and her children, but even now are concerned that B is not totally drug free, and that the environment that the children are exposed to is far from ideal.

C's heroin addiction was much more serious than that of B and consequently she suffered a serious deterioration in intellectual ability. This seriously limited her employment aspirations, although her prospects have gradually improved. C also has a shorter life expectancy, because of a drug-related disease.

There are many other facets to the personal cost of drug use as experienced by family Z, hence they are willing to speak confidentially to the Committee to explain in some detail the impact this has had on their lives.

In addition to personal stories like that above, we are also aware that the escalation in drug-related vandalism, crime and violence in society also drains the public purse – it places pressure on hospital beds, ambulance and medical services, insurance costs, prisons, police and parole services, charitable organizations, local council amenities and so on.

WHAT GOT US HERE?

The AFA believes that a range of factors have been responsible for the current level of illicit drug use, and apart from looking at the impact of "harm minimization", the AFA wishes to mention some of these other factors very briefly, and points out that the list below is by no means exhaustive.

LANGUAGE

Illicit drugs are illicit because they are destructive. There is no room any more for flirting with the idea that they can be used "safely", or that some drugs are "recreational" or "soft". This type of language is false and simply plays into the hands of those who have a vested interest in drug promotion.

The term "harm minimization" is likewise misleading and reinforces the false idea that drugs can be used "safely". Such terminology should be eradicated from any discussion of illicit drugs.

POP CULTURE

If you walk into many mainstream music stores today you will easily be aware of the sinister tone of much that is available. This is matched by slogans on all manner of fashion items, articles in magazines, pullout posters and so on, so that those who are exposed to this milieu can become completely immersed in morbid thoughts

THE AUSTRALIAN FAMILY ASSOCIATION

and suggestions, many of which are associated with illicit drugs.

Once upon a time these things were not openly displayed and really only existed on the fringe of society – now they are mainstream and gaining.

Parents instinctively know that these things are harming their children, but they feel powerless to combat this influence. This is exacerbated by drug education programs in schools, which recommend themselves to students by drawing attention to their parents' use of legal drugs and lack of understanding of the realities of the drug scene.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

It seems the law *is* an ass. The hypocrisy of the term *decriminalization*, whereby law enforcers regard a little bit of this drug or that drug as OK if it is for personal / recreational use, has really betrayed our youth. Any drug use, no matter how small a quantity is involved, simply supports the producers and traffickers of drugs.

Being lenient on small quantities of drugs also completely ignores the slippery slope reality of drug addiction, and the evidence that drugs can cause the onset of serious mental illness, even though this is not always immediately apparent, owing to a delayed effect.

FAMILY BREAKDOWN

The breakdown of marriage and stable family life makes our children and youth very vulnerable. When there is trouble in the home, children seek solace outside the home, and many times they also seek outlets that expresses their resentment and frustration – vandalism, drugs, and other risky behaviour.

Children are particularly at risk of engaging in these behaviours when they live with a parent who has a de facto relationship. This detracts from children's sense of security and closeness of relationship with the biological parent.

Hence, as marriages break down and de facto relationships increase, more children will slip out of the home and into the sub-culture that is the breeding ground for anti-social behaviour and drug use.

We are now looking at multi-generational drug use, so that many children are caught up in their parents' drug-using world. The best chance for many of these children is when the grandparents step up and shoulder the responsibility of bringing up the children. However, where this support is not available, the prospects of children are very poor.

THE IMPACT OF HARM MINIMISATION

The very term "harm minimisation" is a problem. "Harm minimisation" somehow gives tacit approval to drug use. It implies that drugs are OK, provided we don't see needles in the gutter and addicts shooting up in laneways. It compromises with use of illicit drugs and normalizes it.

Harm minimization effectively places a wedge between parents and their children. It says to our youth, "We know you are going to do drugs, so here are some clean needles for free, and here is how you use them." This approach gives very mixed messages to our youth, who see it as the green light to engage in illicit behaviour. This completely undermines parental authority.

The harm minimization approach also ignores the fact that the drugs of themselves are highly destructive. Also it flirts with nonsense, like the idea that the most dangerous aspect of a drug is that it is illegal, and takes ameliorative steps from this stance.

THE AUSTRALIAN FAMILY ASSOCIATION

Harm minimization proponents like to paint their approach as compassionate, and yet what is really happening is that drug users are sustained in their drug use. This occurs in methadone programs, proposals for shooting galleries, and decriminalization of drug possession for personal use. The only really compassionate approach is to free drug-users from drugs altogether.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

SPEAK CLEARLY ON DRUGS

Let us get rid of terminology that misleads our youth into thinking that drugs are "recreational". It needs to be made clear that illicit drugs are destructive and never "safe".

The aim should be to have a drug-free society, where drug use is viewed as unacceptable. The 2006 United Nations' report, *Sweden's Successful Drug Policy: A Review of the Evidence*, shows that, after a decade of harm minimization saw drug dependence among the young increase, the conclusion was drawn that to aim for a drug-free society would bring the nation far closer to this ideal than any compromise. That was in 1978 and the result is that now Sweden's drug dependence among teenagers and those in their early twenties is a fraction of that among other Scandinavian and EU countries.

ENFORCE THE LAW

No amount of illicit drug possession should be tolerated anywhere, but particularly not in gaols. We must follow the wise old adage of "hate the sin but love the sinner". The best thing is to come down hard on drug use. It may seem tough to some, but the parents in family Z (above) commented that being picked up by the police saved their children's lives.

DETOXIFICATION AND REHABILITATION

Drug users should be nipped in the bud by being offered effective detoxification and rehabilitation as early as possible. Detoxification and rehabilitation should be compulsory (court ordered) for those who come to the attention of the police. In Sweden this is offered as an alternative to prison, or is mandated by the courts.

Drug users need long term residential rehabilitation with effective follow up, once back in the community. Recidivism is common after detoxification, so any rehabilitation and maintenance must be structured and residential.

Recognising the role of the family in rehab.

Just as illicit drug use affects the whole family, rehab. programmes should, wherever possible, involve other members of the drug user's family. Shutting parents and siblings out of the process undermines the family unit, which at the end of the day usually picks up the pieces.

WAYS TO STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

It is only by looking deeply at the contributing factors and the flawed philosophical framework that has allowed these factors to flourish, that there can be any hope of formulating a proper plan to rescue our youth and our families from the destructive power of illicit drugs.

The suggestions listed above, however, really only amount to "shutting the stable door after the horse has bolted". What is really needed is a strategy encompassing public policy, education and resources which foster strong marriages and strong families.

THE AUSTRALIAN FAMILY ASSOCIATION

Respect for marriage and parental authority

While for many families it may be too late to be rescued, the only way to ensure a brighter future is to focus on building strong marriages where both husband and wife are able to support each other in the bringing up of the children, and where their authority as parents is respected and not undermined.

Parents need time to be parents

Successful family life happens when parents have time to be together to discuss daily concerns as they arise, make plans, and simply have fun.

Successful family life happens when parents have time to spend with their children on a daily basis. Children should be able to air their problems without rush – opening up to parents does not happen according to a timetable.

We should be aiming for a society where it is possible for every family to have a parent in the home. Taking care of the home and the children is a noble profession and it is very much a full time task. Having a parent at home is for an increasing number of families only a dream.

To aim for this should not be viewed as utopian, but rather as an urgent necessity. Any attempt to attack the problem of illicit drug use that ignores this holistic approach would fly in the face of the stark reality.

Parents need to know how to parent

To break the cycle of destructive behaviours and ineffective parenting, positive parenting programs should be made widely available.

CONCLUSION

There will never be an easy solution to freeing society of illicit drugs, but one thing is for sure: we won't even make a dent on the problem if we don't aim high – what families want is a drug-free society. We need to take a tougher approach, enforce the law and steer users into detox. and rehab programs as early as possible.

Hand in hand with these strategies, we need to strengthen family life, which is the best insurance policy for our nation's youth.

Mrs Mary-Louise Fowler,

President,

Australian Family Association (NSW)

MARCH 19, 2007

APPENDIX given in confidence

Family Z mentioned in the body of this submission wishes to remain anonymous, but is willing to make a personal appearance before the Committee.