

The Secretary of the Committee
Inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House Canberra ACT 2600

This submission addresses your terms of reference from the point of view of parents of a heroin addict, our daughter, who died from an overdose.

Term of reference 1

There have been social and personal costs to us, our extended family and friends in the loss of companionship, disruption to social gatherings and some negative attitudes directed towards us. The addiction effectively prevented our daughter from having a stable domestic relationship which may have produced children and the joy of grandchildren. The emotional load of these factors is very heavy.

The financial costs we have incurred relate to support for living expenses and payment of bills, which arise from the over-expenditure on drugs to the detriment of food, housing and health. The cost over the twenty year period of on-and-off dependence have never been totalled (and never regretted) but were considerable.

Term of reference 2

The most significant harm minimisation initiative, from our point of view, is the establishment of the Sydney injecting room. Our daughter overdosed at a time when she was making frequent attempts to stop using, through clinics and residential programs. The stopping and starting of use is a particularly vulnerable time for overdosing and had the injecting room been available at the time of her death she would have used it and survived. Hopefully she would have finally overcome her dependence and resumed the productive life in both the family and community she had lived during previous extended periods when not using.

She also benefited from needle exchange programs which clearly aid individuals and the wider community as well as reducing worry for the families of users. She also had long periods of a fairly normal life through methadone treatment, which while unfortunately not resulting in permanent abstinence gave her and us periods of normal life and encouragement for her and us to keep trying. During these periods she was also able to give help to the community as a valued telephone counsellor.

Term of reference 3

Strong family support for addicts is a very positive factor in helping them to overcome addiction (a point frequently made to us by our daughter). To be able to give this support families need help in understanding the facts of addiction, and sympathetic discussion

and advice at times of crisis affecting either the drug user or the family relationship. This is supplied by groups such as the Family Drug Support organisation and Lifeline.

The requirement for ongoing public support of these organisations is obvious not only for the emotional support of the family but as well to reduce the costs to the general community of stress, relationship failure and addiction.

Public awareness and reduction of community ignorance and prejudice, through programs similar to those addressing misconceptions about mental disorders like depression, would also assist families to cope with the situation.

Conclusion

The cost to families of having a member dependent on illicit (or, indeed, legal) drugs is severe emotionally and financially. Support for these families will reduce the risks of family disruption and the personal and economic costs of the stress that can result if the issues are not handled in an effective and supportive manner.

We recommend that the Committee strongly support organisations offering help to families of users and the continuation and further development of harm minimisation services like injecting rooms, needle exchanges and methadone and other programs.