

Monday, 24 September 2001
REPRESENTATIVES 31233

Family and Community Affairs Committee

Paper

Mr WAKELIN (Grey) (1.20 p.m.)—On behalf of the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, I present a discussion paper entitled *Where to next?—Inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities*.

On behalf of the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs, I would like to make some brief comments on the discussion

paper I have just tabled. The discussion paper is titled *Where to next?* The committee began its exploration of the social and economic

costs of drug abuse, substance abuse, about a year ago. We have covered a lot of issues and we have much to do yet. The subject of how substance abuse affects families,

the workplace, the health care system and the justice systems is both difficult and complex. Even though we have taken 5,000 pages of evidence, we feel as though we have only just scratched the surface. We trust our work will continue into the next parliament.

The discussion paper could be described as containing our preliminary findings. It provides a snapshot of what people are doing to prevent and deal with drug abuse and it describes what we believe to be some of the key issues we as a community need to address

to improve our ability to deal effectively with substance abuse.

Of all the things we have discussed, perhaps the most striking is the lack of coordination and collaboration between Commonwealth, state, territory and local government agencies and non-government organisations within those jurisdictions. As a committee we think there is a clear need for a much more integrated national structure.

We met a vast number of people whose honesty has helped us to better understand the whole matter. We have heard from those who have become addicted to drugs and are struggling to release themselves from that addiction. We have talked to prisoners in jail

about their substance abuse. We have heard from parents whose lives have been totally changed by the discovery that their son or daughter is in trouble with drugs. We have talked to hundreds of people working in the alcohol and other drugs sectors, and they have told us about what they are doing and what, in their view, we ought to be doing better. To these people in particular we extend

our appreciation for taking the time and the trouble to share their experience with us. We are grateful to all those people for trusting

us and for having faith in the process of this parliamentary inquiry. Their honesty has enlightened us and encouraged us to face our responsibility and demonstrate moral leadership and bipartisanship in this area.

We recognise how easy it is, when confronted

with the apparent intractability of substance abuse issues, to retreat into clichés,

quick fixes—excuse the pun—and prejudices. But, as one wise witness pointed out to us, our constituents expect much more from us as parliamentarians. They expect us to rise above the temptation to play politics with a life and death subject like this. They expect us to try to raise the tone of the debate;

to resist the temptation to demonise and scapegoat; to look for common, workable solutions across the political divide; and to express honestly our differences and possible

solutions. This is what we intend to do. The discussion paper we are tabling today will be, we hope, regarded as a good beginning. I commend the discussion paper to the House.

Ms ELLIS (Canberra) (1.23 p.m.)—Over 12 months ago, the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs began this inquiry, an inquiry the committee had sought. We were, across all party lines, of the

strong view that an inquiry of this type should be initiated. It was back in 1977 when

the Senate standing committee's Baume report

made recommendations calling for a national approach to drug abuse. We felt as a committee that the time had well and truly

arrived for a comprehensive federal parliamentary inquiry. This discussion paper represents our work to date—a sort of stocktake of the situation after some 12 months of evidence gathering and listening to people from around the country.

I would expect that some sectors of the community may be a little bit disappointed that we are issuing a discussion paper and not a full report. I would understand that response.

The dedication of many, the urgency of the situation and the desperate need for help of so many would reflect a wish by some to see solutions and recommendations now. But this is an enormous inquiry, deserving of nothing less than a true, honest, full approach by the committee, and the time that we have had, from the time we adopted the inquiry until now, has simply not been sufficient for us to pay adequate regard to all of those points.

I would like to make a couple of quick points from my perspective, given this particular stage in the inquiry. There is an absolute need for all politicians, at all levels in the country, to adopt a bipartisan role when discussing this issue. We simply must work together. There has to be compromise; intransigence on anybody's part will never allow a solution. We must stop arguing these things on moral grounds and debate them on health grounds, because that is where it is. The media need to understand the role that they play and the good and bad that they can effect in such a debate. Resources and support simply must be clearly identified. There is no central source nationally to show us who is doing what, where and how, and research is badly required in the area of data collection.

We need to remember that we are looking at all substance abuse in this inquiry. Ninety per cent of the costs of drug abuse in 1992 were attributable to the misuse of the legal drugs alcohol and tobacco, and they must be given an emphasis in any future inquiry. The workers in this area need to be resourced and valued as front-line workers. They should not be treated as second rate to their peers in

other professions. The unanimous view of the committee is that this inquiry should and must continue in the next parliament.

I want to thank the committee secretary—Shelly McInnis, the inquiry secretary, Trevor Rowe, the secretary to the committee and all of their colleagues—for their dedication

in helping us to reach this point. I want to pay due regard to all of those people around the country who, with great courage, contributed so enormously to this paper. We see this as the beginning of the next phase of what we regard to be essential work on behalf

of our committee in the future parliament.

Mr LAWLER (Parkes) (1.27 p.m.)—In opening my comments, I congratulate the chair and the deputy chair on the way this inquiry of the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs on substance abuse has been conducted so far. There was a variety of views around the committee table, but I stress, as previous speakers have, that the difference in opinion was shaped not by party lines but by individuals' different experiences in life, and they reflect the variety of opinions in the community.

What we need to allow in this country is an open and knowledgeable debate. As the inquiry went on, it became quite clear that there was a lot of debate but a lot of it was ill-informed debate. It became quite important

for us to realise that there are a lot of myths associated with the drug debate. Some of those myths refer to the importance that we place, and the media place, on the illicit drugs, when it is clear that tobacco and alcohol

play a large role. I understand that tobacco accounts for over 80 per cent of drug related deaths and around 60 per cent of all drug related hospitalisations, while alcohol is

responsible for about 16 per cent of deaths and about 37 per cent of drug related hospitalisations.

Illicits are responsible for only four per cent of drug related deaths and hospitalisations.

There is also a misconception in the community in that when people think about a drug problem, they are usually

thinking of a drug—marijuana or heroin—when in reality it is usually a polydrug problem.

One of the other myths that came out of the debate and one of its shortcomings is that people look very superficially at statistics.

For example, when there was a pronounced heroin drought recently, many of the media and others thought that must be a great thing, but many of the speakers we were privileged to hear from commented differently. Some of

them said that when there is a heroin drought there is more violence, polydrug use, and increased use of benzodiazepines and amphetamines.

This emphasises the importance of cross-portfolio cooperation and collaboration across all levels of government. For us to ensure that our strategies are working, there needs to be a great deal more cooperation.

Finally, the impact on people in jail was something that came to prominence at the committee hearings. Witnesses estimated that

the proportion of the prison population with drug or alcohol problems was as high as 75 per cent, whereas statistics show that 51 per cent of people jailed on possession of drugs or drug use charges in 2001 had been inside a jail before. So, clearly, we need to place the

emphasis on re-education and rehabilitation, not just on increasing law and order.

Mr EDWARDS (Cowan) (1.30 p.m.)—I strongly endorse and support the comments made by the previous speakers on this discussion

paper entitled *Where to next?—Inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities*. I certainly reinforce the need for a bipartisan approach to this issue, such is

the challenge and such is the damage that drugs are doing to our society. The public must demand, and must receive, a bipartisan response to this issue from leaders such as members of parliament. The other issue I strongly want to endorse is the need for open debate, where people can come and put their views without being shot at or dealt with in an unfair way. There has to be a full and open debate on this issue if we are going to come to terms with the enormity of it, and courage must be shown by members of parliament

and other leaders on all sides of this debate if we are going to advance the issue and deal with it properly, as we should.

I endorse other comments that have been made about the courage of parents who have come before the Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs. I do not think there was a member of this committee who, at one stage, did not have tears in his or her eyes from listening to the harrowing, haunting stories that parents have told about their difficulties in trying to deal with the addiction of their children to drugs. If we need any more motivation than that, I think we have missed the point. The motivation is there and the need is there, and when this parliament resumes we must return and finish

this report and finish this job, which is something that has to be done and has to be accepted by the next parliament.

Mr QUICK (Franklin) (1.32 p.m.)—I too would like to add my comments on the discussion

paper entitled *Where to next?—Inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities*. I congratulate all members of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs

committee. I think there were 12 of us—the normal 10, plus two others who showed a real interest. As the honourable member for Canberra said, this discussion paper is an interim report. I would also like to endorse the comments of the member for Cowan. All of us have been touched in various

ways by the experiences that we shared, whether they were visits to jail, talking to addicts who are in the middle of rehabilitation

and struggling to avoid resuming their addictive behaviour or talking to young people

who are at the crossroads of their lives. I know one personally who I am closely related

to and have seen the attempts by his mother, Kate, to steer Jason on the right path.

There is the whole issue of tough love and parents biting the bullet and saying, 'Enough is enough; it's up to you to try to remove yourself from this addictive behaviour.'

As previous speakers have said, it is also a

matter of putting the heat on state and federal governments to come up with a national approach.

As I said today at the launch, we hear so much about national approaches, yet we still have rail gauge problems and a solo mentality in so many of our state government agencies and departments. Let us get away from the focus on heroin and marijuana and really get stuck into the alcohol and tobacco substance part of this inquiry.

Finally, I too would like to congratulate the members of the secretariat, who put up with us when we were busy rephrasing and re-positioning various bits of their report. They are wonderful people and they deserve our respect and admiration. I commend this discussion paper to all Australians and I hope they pester the secretariat to get copies and then put the pressure back onto state and federal politicians to do something about this very serious issue.

Ms HALL (Shortland) (1.34 p.m.)—I also want to support what has been said about this discussion paper entitled *Where to next?—Inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities* that is being released. I would like to emphasise the fact that we need to have a bipartisan approach to this real challenge that is facing our society. I would also like to add that substance abuse, which is what we have looked at here, does not end with opiates. It is all-encompassing and includes drugs and alcohol and we must get behind—

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl)—Order! The time allotted for statements on this paper has expired. Does the member for Grey wish to move a motion in connection with the paper to enable it to be debated on a future occasion?

Mr WAKELIN (Grey) (1.35 p.m.)—I move:

That the House take note of the paper.
I seek leave to continue my remarks later.
Leave granted.

Mr DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Nehl)—In accordance with standing order 102B, the debate is adjourned. The resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting, and the member will have

leave to continue speaking when the debate is resumed.