



Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
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Canberra, ACT 2600.

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To the Chairperson Hon Bronwyn Bishop MP,

I write in relation to your enquiry into how the Australian government may help families affected by illicit substance use.

The financial, social and personal cost to families who have a member(s) using illicit drugs, including the impact of drug induced psychoses or other mental disorders.

When one or more people use an illicit substance of any kind on a regular basis, it effects the whole family unit in all of the ways that this enquiry is looking at. Even where only one person uses a substance the dysfunction that they exhibit causes other dysfunctional withi the family unit.

Where one or more parents use illicit substances the child/ren often the oldest are put in situations where they take on the role and responsibilities of the parent. This role shift causes many developmental problems and in a very real sense steals their childhood. When a child should be enjoying life, learning and developing they are forced into growing up far too quickly and taking on roles that is to their detriment later in their life.

Another issue that goes with illicit drug use is crime. To support growing habits with the increase of tolerance and the need for more of the illicit substance to have the same effect there are financial problems which leads to crime. Crime leads to imprisonment and imprisonment leads to a family not having a parent for a period of time. I know of instances where both parents have faced periods of imprisonment.

Social; illicit substance abuse causes social dysfunction in the parents, people who use illicit substances regularly become absorbed in their behaviour and then need more and more of the substance, which then begins to control their life, which results in them becoming socially isolated as their main or only concern is their need to obtain and use their substance of choice. For the children brought up in such situations they are not taught how to effectively function into society because their main socialisation agent is dysfunctional and consequently they develop many social inhibitions as well as developing many behaviours that are socially unacceptable, especially in relation to aggression.

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Role Model; a major impact for families who have a member(s) who use illicit substances is the area of the role model that a significant other or an authority figure gives to the younger members of that family. When a child observes a parent/guardian who is an authority figure participating in such behaviour it is giving them permission to do also participate in such behaviours. There are also cases (and I know of a few) where parents will take this the next step and introduce their children to illicit substances. The other factor is were a person uses a substance, the child learns that behaviour, the parent then turns a blind eye, because they can not very convincingly tell their grown children off for something they are doing themselves. I believe that the increase in youth committing crime, the increase in youth drug use, the lowering of the age many start using substances (and it is getting lower all the time) is partially as a result of this cyclic generational family systems. People are socialised into behaviour they do without ever questioning many of them.

Domestic Violence; illicit substance use (and legal substances) lays as a root cause behind many cases of domestic violence (Reported and unreported). Many illicit substances increase the level of aggression that an individual many experience which causes many problems within the family unit, many otherwise resolvable conflicts turn into domestic violence. Because of the many other dysfunctional behaviours that results from illicit substance abuse also helps increase the level of domestic violence such as poor communication, being self-absorbed in their endeavour to feed their substance addiction etc.

Financial; as people who use illicit substances struggle with being able to support their habit financially, which leads to many financial problems which in turn leads to many turning to agencies that help with food and other bills.

Personal; individuals who use illicit substances struggle with mental health issues, become suicidal and perhaps homicidal, in their endeavours to gain access to their substance of choice they ecome sel-obsorbed and socially isolated. Every part of a person's life is effected by illicit substance use, to what degree dependnds largely on how often they use it and what quantties.

The impact of drug induced psychoses or other mental disorders; the bottom line is the greater the effects of drugs both physically and mental the greater the dysfunction. When a family member struggles with psychosis, depression and other mental health disorders as a result of illicit substance use this causes greater dysfunction and struggle within the family unit. In many cases where a family member has a mental health issue or a substance use issue they can become a burden to or dependant upon their partners debilitating and dysfunctional ways. In many cases partners begin to play a role not dissimilar to that of a parent for their partners.

The impact of harm minimisation programs on families.

Any program that minimises the harm for person, especially a child has got to be good. The bottom line there is not enough programs for families.

I recently came into contact with a couple (who had no children) who both needed time out or detoxification. We do not have facilities to enable both to enter the program, so we accepted one client and sent the other to Burnie hospital. Burnie hospital kept the client in for 24 hours, gave her a few Panadol, left her feeling like an outcast and then discharged her. Meanwhile the other client in our service also left because he didn't want to leave his partner to fend by themselves. So the bottom line is there are not enough services to help develop any significant harm minimisation programs most seem aimed at individuals.

Ways to strengthen families who are coping with a member(s) using illicit drugs.

Family based interventions need to be in place in all regions Tasmania including Hobart, Launceston, Devonport, Burnie, Smithton and Scottsdale.

We recently opened two, three bedroom houses to enable us to work the whole family unit (parents and children). Ultimately we need another 4 houses, and recurrent funding for staff. We need staff to both support families who have got to a point of needing a residential rehabilitation program as well as staff who reach out into the community and help the family in their own environment.

More service, more interventions at earlier stages of drug dependence, more support for the education departments to be able to identify families at risk of such behaviours, and more support for children who are involved in families where illicit substances are used, programs such as rainbows, child care centres that focus more on social factors and more counsellors and psychologists in schools providing both preventative measures and follow up to children who are victims of such abuses if the Australian government should investigate to enable them to more effectively help families effected by illicit substance use.

Thank you for your time

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