

## **Submission to the House of Representatives Committee Enquiry into Substance Abuse in Australian Communities**

### **Abstract**

This submission presents some of the costs associated with and incurred by the current approach to legal and illegal drug use in Australia. It concentrates on the expense which is hidden from statistics that normally deal with directly evaluated data. These costs usually only reveal themselves by taking a wider view, in terms of time as well as subject areas.

It begins by defining the characteristics of what an investigation entails and how they subsequently affect the perspective of the observer. Under these auspices various world views are presented that contribute to the situation, being followed by their influences upon the current topic.

### **Introduction**

An investigation incorporates two fundamental entities: the subject matter and the general world view it is perceived with. It is the former which provides the material for the investigation, and it is the latter that forms a filter through which the information passes.

Just as an observer is ultimately limited by the extent of his/her knowledge base in interpreting that which is seen, so do the observer's values and priorities determine the degree of significance of what is being identified. It follows that a limited amount of knowledge, combined with a belief system which rejects the little that *is* seen can hide or skew the information which is nevertheless available. This also imposes a cost to the observer and subsequently to the system for which the observer acts.

The submission outlines some of the world views considered to be relevant and their associated costs. Similar to the terms of reference for this enquiry, it does not contain any proposals for action but focuses on the characteristics of held attitudes and beliefs and points out their wider ramifications and dangers. *World Views* lists the current attitudes; *The Drugs Issue* outlines their significance in terms of the present topic.

## World Views

The dynamics of the 20th century have caused the emergence, dispersal, and confluence of several strands of philosophies, which through their foci of interests created certain attitudes amongst the societies of developed nations.

The advances of technology enabled the spread of information not only across the boundaries of political systems, but also across their demographic equivalents. Although the information flow increased, the final recipient, the human brain, did not show an accompanying general growth of its information processing capacity; nor do the communication channels themselves monitor their content as to its context and applicability in relation to the final destination.

A corollary to the information flow mentioned above is the greater awareness of the general populace when it comes to the perception we have of our leaders. I do not consider it appropriate to believe that our present politicians are any better or worse than their equivalents in earlier times. On the other hand one can say that the constant public exposure of various failings do contribute to a growing disenchantment with our administrators due to the accumulating effect of media attention. Since politicians are part of the public infrastructure (which is after all necessary) the resultant cynicism is also directed towards the standardising framework without which a society loses its cohesion.

The increase in the standards of living had the side effect of hiding potential dangers which before the improvement were held as common intellectual good by society at large. Because the immediacy of danger receded, the significance of several views and attitudes are less understood (a prime example is the objection to immunisation held by some people).

With the implementation of feminist principles came the enactment of priorities which in a male-oriented society would not have been given as much prominence. The transference of the mother instinct into areas of public life shifted the emphasis from a society-based view to an individual-based view. Just as a mother will first and foremost protect her offspring (ie that which she considers to be her own) against the outside, so do special interest groups concentrate their energies on what they perceive benefits them, rather than society at large. A small-scale example is the insistence of a mother to include her disabled child in the general school curriculum, no matter what problems such a stance causes for the teachers and the rest of students. On a larger scale the generic antagonism shown by representatives of special interests towards anything they hold to be not their very own imposes a great deal of cost and energy upon the basic process of living.

The availability of information enabled many people (and their interest groups) to participate in actions, not always because they grasped the significance of one or the other item, but because their background knowledge produced states of concern which a better acquaintance with facts would have prevented. This is one side-effect of democratisation that represents a potential long term danger to a democratic system and all the benefits it brings otherwise.

In tandem with an increased complexity of scientific issues and their applications together with their corresponding superficiality in transmission there is a wide-spread lack of a comprehensive understanding of what such issues really mean. The resultant disenfranchisement amongst large sections of the community resulted in the growth of cells which tend to see science and industry as a single image block inherently adversarial towards humanity, and therefore needing to be opposed. Correspondingly, societies and cultures which display a lesser degree of sophistication are seen as being preferable, imbuing the general conditions in those societies with a kind of romanticism that is largely removed from reality. The fascination with and double standards towards indigenous cultures in the West is one example (note that such a fascination is quite foreign to Non-western societies and indeed is a source of wonderment there); the rejection of the classic scientific approach in favour of ambiguous subjectivism, even amongst some academics, is another.

A related phenomenon can be seen in the antagonistic attitude displayed towards humans per se. A mixture of the love for mediocrity, disenchantment with Western intellectual rigour, and peppered with a certain feminist zeal against what is seen as the patriarchal principle, the notion that the “environment” has first and foremost priority over anything human has been gradually adopted into our philosophical vocabulary. A psychological bond has been created linking “environment” with “nature”, “nurture”, “passivity” and so the “female”, whereas the “artificial” is being fused with “activity”, “achievement”, “control”, and thus the “male”. Combined with the values mentioned in the previous paragraph the result is that artifacts tend to invite a hostile attitude, whereas so-called natural developments are admired.

In the aftermath of the two world wars a deep-reaching re-appraisal of social and religious beliefs brought about a change towards behaviour forms and social groups which unfortunately created stereotypes of its own. While it is true that authoritarianism makes for victims, it is also true that some behaviours can harden attitudes which then in turn become inflexible and aggressive. As such the first layer of a perpetrator-victim scenario does not necessarily tell the underlying truth. In tandem with the stereotypical view of “here is a victim, therefore there has to be a villain somewhere” the general idea took hold that anyone who happens to be in a state of suffering must have got there through an outside agent alone (this is the exact converse of the equally extreme, “it’s all the victim’s fault”).

A further attitude change involves the meaning of the word “equal”. A by-product of the re-evaluation of belief systems, their previous categorisation of some people as being more “equal” than others before the general values of society produced an extension of the word’s significance into areas which are mostly concerned with the inherent ability of an individual. “Equal before the law” then changed to “equal to the task at hand”, with the consequence that a certain—and inevitable—positive or negative outcome was taken as representative of society as a whole. Note that such a change is not being applied uniformly; that is, we still confer privileges based upon the demonstrated skill relevant to a particular activity (eg driving a car). Yet at the same time there is also the tendency to consider everyone as being equally competent (or incompetent, as the case may be) when it comes to such things as gambling, the bringing up of children—or the consumption of drugs. For instance, the often made statement “mothers know best” is meaningless since the word “mothers” is an abstract denoting the state of motherhood but as such has

nothing to do with humans per se. When it comes to people there is a mother<sub>1</sub>, mother<sub>2</sub>, mother<sub>3</sub>, etc, all of whom may have quite differing characteristics.

Associated with the trend towards a lower common denominator described above has been the reluctance to depict outstanding acts as a guide to others, especially the young. While an over-emphasis on performances that are virtually impossible to emulate does not always generate encouragement, the Western entertainment culture has, over the last decades, offered the image of mediocrity as something to be aspired to, and portrayed dysfunctional behaviour as an achievement in itself. This leads to situations where accomplishments can actually be a source of ridicule.

Not all paradigms have undergone the same degree of change, and not all are being linked to the same areas of concern. For example, the Judeo-Christian view, predominant in the West, consistently applied relatively stringent considerations to human sexuality. An activity that affects sexual behaviour as well is therefore going to be viewed with scepticism at best, alarm and utter rejection at worst, with accompanying measures being taken by the authorities. This applies equally to “legal” circumstances (such as in-vitro fertilisation for instance) as well as “illegal” ones (as is the case with drugs).

The effects of multiculturalism (I use the word in terms of the demographic equivalent to the free-flow of information) produced a de-homogenisation of society where previously common standards have been replaced with a multi-faceted mixture of conveniences. It has become unrealistic to expect a particular behaviour form to be accepted or rejected on the basis of its relationship to a certain culture. Rather, the individuals in a society choose their preferred modes according to their needs, whether they be cultural, religious, political, or plainly a matter of taste.

I would like to emphasise that the above listed world views do not in themselves constitute a danger to society per se. Their existence came about because they were seen to be beneficial compared to more traditional versions and the conditions those happened to impose. It is their ramifications in certain areas which in my opinion need to be considered. They do however show the sheer diversity and complexity of modern life, and to isolate some in favour of others only because it suits a particular argument, is misreading the situation and in turn prevents constructive conclusions from being drawn. An isolationist approach also makes it possible for antagonists to perpetually argue their own points supported by real examples, simply because our contemporary social landscape harbours so many features to suit just about everyone’s purpose.

## **The Drugs Issue**

Over the last fifty years we have witnessed the effects of the various influences listed in the previous section against the general background of attempts by Western governments to curb the use and abuse of drugs. The statistics showing the costs incurred by law enforcement agencies in those countries are sobering, especially when one considers that such figures grew in conjunction with an escalating rise in drug consumption overall, particularly when it comes to what are classified as illegal substances. The numbers have been collected by various bodies, here and overseas, and no doubt the Committee will be

presented once again with relevant examples. I would like to add several other costs which, because of their nature, are not so easily described in direct statistical terms.

The sheer multiplicity of social and moral values in our modern society, compared to the relatively singular representation of guidelines established by governing bodies, has resulted in a certain amount of cynicism and de-sensitisation towards the official versions of morality. There does not seem to be a sufficient understanding amongst policy-making circles of the sheer extent of such cynicism. Because a deeper analysis of social forces on part of the recipient is usually lacking, that attitude is not focused on particular issues but has grown into a wider perspective towards law and order which posits the law on one side and the citizen on the other. Considering the history of law enforcement, this is understandable. If the police has been used to curtail the lives of gays for example, then the image of “police” is being associated with attributes that are hardly conducive to an overall respect by the wider community, especially when more enlightened attitudes are in direct confrontation with the values espoused by the law. Within the context of psychological image-building it does not matter that there are possibly significant differences between one issue and another.

Given the global information flow, the awareness of behaviour forms in other cultures also impacts on the personal opinion of individuals who recognise the existence of a habit in one country and compare it with the treatment afforded that same habit in their own. Combine this with the fact that every society on this planet practices the taking of drugs of one kind or another, and the result is a further deterioration in the relationship between citizens and the governing strata of their society. It was not so long ago that most authorities in Western countries (including Australia) painted even the smallest consumption of marijuana for instance as evil while completely disregarding the sometimes devastating effects of legal drugs, which not only were left alone by the law but were actively sponsored by industry. Thankfully, a more rational attitude is beginning to emerge; however, the damage has been done.

It also needs to be recognised that while members of any society do take drugs, in a more traditional setting there are also checks and balances which seek to curb excessive behaviour, especially by the young. One example should suffice. In most of Europe the consumption of alcohol is part of parcel of social life. It is not uncommon therefore for a family (including the children) to sit down to a dinner at a restaurant where wine is part of the meal. It is equally not uncommon for young teenagers to be allowed a few sips. Note that this is occurring under controlled circumstances, and as such the desire of the young person to be an “adult” is balanced by the parental caution at the same time. The lure that unattainable activities have, particularly when they are associated with something that is attractive (in this case adulthood) is therefore largely diminished. Note also that in this case there is practically no involvement by the law, and the regulatory process is entirely handled by the parents or relatives. Not only does that prevent the introduction of outside forces which at that point in the young person’s life are hardly understood anyway, but the child-parent interaction is based on the momentary, individual context of the situation (taking account of such diverse situations as a basic night out versus a Christmas dinner for example). Do our laws—any laws for that matter—take account of those subtle differences? Hardly.

The intrusion of the law into such matters does not produce positive results. Since the police is an outside element their effect is usually diminished in terms of law enforcement per se. It also undermines the authority of the parents, the very people society ought to support in the upbringing of their children, and so in the long run the situation is made only worse.

Our generally easier life style has in many cases removed the opportunity for people to test themselves. Yet the desire—indeed the psychological and social need—for a person to be self-confident requires the taking up of challenges. Again, this need is most pronounced in the young. I do not for a moment bemoan the absence of a war to aid in the process of identity creation. Furthermore, a personal involvement in hardship is not always necessary. In fact, the building of confidence and a positive self-image is also achieved via transference; that is the exposure to other people's adventures, their efforts, suffering, and eventual victory also acts as a constructive example to those who had not ventured beyond the familiar. Returning to the point made in the previous section, the absence of such heroes and their stories removes from the person the guidance towards one's higher self. In addition, the increasing attempts to remove any possible hazards from the daily lives of citizens, especially the young, may look attractive to potential targets of litigants and those who are ruled by the mother instinct; it also makes for a society of wimps.

Again, the theoretical differentiation between various aspects, in this case "adventure" and "adulthood" is mostly meaningless at the grass roots level. To stretch one's endeavours, whether they be a "real" challenge or simply the acting out of adult behaviour, acquires the same psychological significance to the challenger, especially when it is one's own self that is being challenged. The fact that the young's experimentation with drugs and the creation of subcultures and gangs sometimes ends up on the wrong side of the law should be a definite warning signal to those who understand social dynamics. Given the current context, one could argue that those very activities, as misguided as they can be in practice, nevertheless prove the existence of some spirit still!

Every test includes failures. Most who strive for the highest have to settle for something less; some do not even strive. Society is made up of the whole spectrum of achievements, and just as there are individual differences there are differing standards between communities and cultures, always measured against the requirements of their respective environments. The afore-mentioned leveling of critical perception when it comes to the endeavours of society's members brought about a general unwillingness to differentiate between an act performed with a certain degree of ability and one without. Notwithstanding such acts of official leveling, it is not accompanied by a similar readiness on behalf of the individual. There the desire to be rewarded for success with a commensurate acceptance of the occasional shortcoming is a factor which managers of any kind overlook at their risk. Whether the occasion is a yacht under sail, an office, or a play in sport, human beings have an inherent sense of fairness when it comes to personal skills and accomplishments. There is no team where the conferring of additional authority and freedom on a particular member if linked to that member's better performance is not met with approval. Conversely, if a manager should be so insensitive and allow privileges despite a poor performance, the team spirit will be destroyed.

The tendency to disregard differences in performance and ability has led to a reduction in dimensions of perception with regards to positive as well as negative activities. Although we as a society see it quite in order to allow certain people to fly aircraft because they have proven to be capable and not others because they didn't, we do not show the same rationality when it comes to most drugs. Rather than improving society by such willful denial of human differences, the quality of all suffers. The immediate effects of this attitude can be seen in terms of the universal punishment meted out to offenders. While being "over the limit" through alcohol (a legal drug) is tolerated provided the setting had been appropriate, the consumption of the illegal variety attracts the attention of the authorities no matter what the circumstances are. Even in the area of legal substances one can detect an intrusion of these principles however. As the marketing exercise of condemning tobacco use gathers momentum, the image of a cigarette smoker as someone who goes through several packets per day is the standard. While there are *some* in the community who do just that, there are many other smokers who do not. The latter could be described as more disciplined, competent, and organised. In relation to them the health campaign not only loses its relevance, it is assigned the image of ridicule and falsehood by the very people it is meant to target, namely those who look to others for guidance (a similar waste of effort can be seen in the area of reward: the payment of study assistance by government is made largely irrespective of the student's performance; someone who does nothing at all gets the same amount of money as someone whose entire life is structured around the course; the result—insufficient funds in general).

An ideological measure which is applied to some behaviour creates a set of values that reflects the ideology's nature, not the nature of the behaviour. It is a contributing factor towards the non-discriminating judgment of an activity as described above. It also does not take account of sometimes overall positive results. While it is acceptable to have a cup of coffee to stimulate one's mental circuits, the same does not apply to some other substances. Nevertheless, our culture does extract capital out of the efforts of an Arthur Conan Doyle or a W. B. Yeats for example.

The aura of illegality hinders the realistic appraisal of the situation. If a range of drugs are illegal, the onus is on the citizen to prevent detection. Only those who cannot manage their affairs adequately will be caught, leaving the others, more capable ones to go free. At that point the statistics reflect the existence of the failures and so create an image which includes the negative aspects only. What basically successful person would come forward and declare "I am a user of such and such", given the legal ramifications of such a move? In fact, it could be argued that the more the fight against drugs intensifies, the greater the range of failures that eventuate in becoming a statistic, and so broadening the set of all those images which are used to portray such "evil". The end effect is a further increase in cynicism and disrespect amongst the populace.

The terms of this enquiry are centred around "costs". Once again, this is a matter of cultural perception. The old proverb, "there is no such thing as a free lunch", certainly applies to the topic at hand. The only way for human society not to incur any cost of some kind would be to abolish human society. Having accepted that argument as a starting point, it then becomes a matter of defining preferences. I do not have the exact current figures of federal and state expenditure in relation to the fight against drugs. Even if I did however, they still would not reflect the overall costs associated with members of a community being removed to jail, systems being delayed because of investigations, the

reluctance of people to confer with authorities, and the economic aspects of the black market itself (an interesting aside: in the middle of 1993 one kilogram of raw cocaine was intercepted by the Guyanese authorities in the main river delta of that country; for the next week the street price of the Guyanese Dollar against the US currency rose by approximately three percent). A rational questioner would want to compare such costs with the actual harm done by the drugs themselves, with the aim to achieve some kind of balance.

There is another potential cost factor which, given current trends, ought to be taken seriously. Official policies change with general perceptions of what is right and wrong. The idea that the state has the right and/or duty to interfere with certain life styles is being critically re-evaluated within the context of indigenous culture, demonstrated by the principles underlying the “stolen generation” debate. Consider the rejection by drug addicts towards the assistance given by say, ambulance officers through applying chemical antidotes to heroin: suppose the law changes such that drug users are no longer dealt with in this way. All it takes is a certain court decision (or a certain statement by a prime minister for that matter) to set a precedent and the way is clear for some groups to apply legal means to demand compensation for what is perceived to have been a wrongful treatment at the time.

Such questions bring into focus some of the themes mentioned before. Since the understanding of one or the other type of behaviour rests ultimately with the individual, it is a matter of personal awareness and values which determine the behaviour, regardless of how other layers of society see the same. If current views do not differentiate between various personal qualities and at the same time consider it appropriate to incur a considerable expense to enforce certain perspectives regardless of the consequences in terms of the actual person involved, then the resultant costs have to be born by everyone in society simply because a small number of its members are bent upon self-destruction. Would the overall expense incurred be redeemed by those that have been “saved” through their quality of output? If the answer is “yes” this implies that the contribution of such individuals is capable of recouping the entire costs applied to the exercise; if the response should be negative, it means that a more efficient way would have been to simply provide the drugs and so prevent the creation of crime syndicates and disruption to the functioning part of society.

No doubt many people would recoil at the implications of the foregoing. I would like to point out however that their attitude can only survive amidst an environment of plenty. There is no guarantee that at some later stage the general standard of living will not decline and then the inherited circumstances become significant indeed. In any case, the availability of information and the increasing use of designed means to modify existing behaviour, style or ambience in our lives make the distinction between legal and illegal means not a matter of morals, but turn such considerations into basic business decisions. The final arbiter then becomes the specific quality of the person making the decisions, not a universal set of declarations. No moralist nor any government has ever been able to prevent the future from unfolding.

## Summary



At the beginning of my submission I have referred to the multi-cultural aspects of our society, or indeed any Western society (see my use of that term on p. 4). Nevertheless, there are certain fundamentals which make themselves felt, one way or another. One of them is the inherent age and maturity of the cultural background of people. Relatively young societies (such as Australia) tend towards overreaction when it comes to contemporary difficulties, with sometimes destructive results. For historical and linguistic reasons we also are close to the United States, a similarly young culture, and some of the social reactions there to what are perceived to be problems can arguably be described as hysterical.

Given the re-orientation of developed nations by scientific achievements it is unrealistic to expect that society will not become accustomed to include chemical substances in its personal life style. Throughout history only those measures have survived which were in tandem with evolution, and the minds responsible for them are still with us in spirit; the rest are just so much dust in a grave.

The current drug use amongst our population, while not without draw-backs, is not the end of the world. It has come about through the emergence and confluence of various broad views which, rightly or wrongly, have embedded themselves in political and social initiatives. Most of those views are related to circumstances which in a different context are actually quite desirable, and so any accompanying problem ought to be perceived with concern, but not alarm.

In the long term a far greater danger is posed by an over-reaction, creating additional hazards which can be worse than the original cause. It was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe who said, "He who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth." We can do worse than ponder his words.

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Brisbane, 10 May 2000