

Substance Abuse in Australian Communities

Submission from the Ted Noffs Foundation, June 2000

To the Parliamentary inquiry into substance abuse being conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs.

Issues from the terms of reference that are addressed in this submission

- **Family relationships**
This submission provides case studies and observations that have been gleaned from clinical practice with families and young people with alcohol and other drug problems. A structural analysis of issues that affect families and ways to improve service provision and community perceptions are also included.
- **Crime, violence, (including domestic violence), and law enforcement**
An overview of the issues that overlap between substance abuse, crime and violence are outlined.
- **Health care costs**
A brief summary of how early intervention could decrease tertiary services costs is included.

Family Relationships

The Ted Noffs Foundation is a not for profit non-government organisation that provides direct assistance to young people and their families. Young people who come to the Ted Noffs Foundation programs have alcohol and/or other drug abuse issues as their primary presenting concern.

As part of a holistic assessment the Ted Noffs Foundation involves the families in the programs to assist young people to overcome their alcohol and other drug problems. The Ted Noffs Foundation has a range of programs from prevention to tertiary services. The Foundation provides a Program for Adolescent Life Management (PALM) that involves a 12-week live in treatment service. Young people must have completed a detoxification program before prior to admission to PALM. This program offers living skills, recreational programs, vocational and education programs and counselling, including family counselling. The Foundation also offers out-client services, including a schools program. The Ted Noffs Foundation offers these services in Eastern and Western Sydney and is currently setting up a residential program in the ACT.

The following family issues have been noted by the Ted Noffs Foundation as part of its clinical experience when assisting families with alcohol and other drug problems. Many of the problems facing these families are exacerbated by social, educational and economic disadvantage. Some of these disadvantages are historical in nature such as the issues facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Generations of families that have been disadvantaged by loss of cultural identity and who have faced poverty and educational disadvantage are not always in a position to access the resources to overcome their disadvantage. Thus while the Ted Noffs Foundation provides services to families and focuses on their issues we acknowledge that their problems and disadvantage are often perpetuated by circumstances that are systemic and beyond their immediate control.

Inter or trans generational transmission of problems

Many families fall into a cycle of perpetuating alcohol and other drug problems as well as social disadvantage from generation to generation. Many young people presenting with alcohol and other drug problems come from a family where there are other family members also abusing alcohol or other drugs. This issue arises in many communities and particularly in more disadvantaged communities, for example in many Aboriginal communities and other marginalised groups.

CASE STUDY 1

Jimmy :

Jimmy was 16 and had problems with the use of heroin, used cannabis daily and also used amphetamines and hallucinogens. Jimmy's main source of income was from illegal activity, including "searching", that is, stealing wallets and other valuables from city office buildings. Crime and drug use were part of his family environment and he frequented the Cabramatta drug scene. Jimmy had attended shorter drug treatment programs, and was referred by Juvenile Justice. He noted on intake that the most significant good event in his life was that he was "still alive".

Types of families and different issues

Seriously Dysfunctional Families

Some families that the Ted Noffs Foundation comes into contact with have serious problems and cannot offer any kind of constructive or nurturing relationship to their children. Thus for young people from these families who present with alcohol and other drug abuse issues there are limited options for ongoing support once the young people have completed the Foundation's PALM the twelve week treatment program.

While the Foundation can offer these young people a structured living skills program and assist them to find housing in the longer term it is difficult for these young people to be reconnected or reconciled with their families and communities. This lack of connection to their families and communities makes them vulnerable individuals.

CASE STUDY 2

Jamie:

Jamie arrived at our service when he was 13, he had been living on the streets and using drugs.

Jamie spent his early years being cared for by his grandparents. His father had left shortly after he was born and his mother remarried and moved away. He had enjoyed living with his grandparents.

When Jamie was six his grandfather died suddenly and his grandmother couldn't cope with looking after him anymore.

He was sent to live with his mother and stepfather who he hardly knew. They had two little girls. He felt he didn't belong. His step-sisters resented him and his mother didn't know how to cope with Jamie's distress at losing his grandfather.

His stepfather assaulted him at Christmas. His uncle then took him in to escape his step-father's violence and sexually assaulted him.

Jamie felt he was much safer living on the streets and started using drugs. To him the damage that occurred on the streets was nothing compared to what had happened to him in his own family.

Options for improving the situation with these families

These families can best be assisted and identified in very early intervention programs. These interventions are most successful when support is provided to the families early in pre and post-natal programs and in the early years of a child's life. Successful programs internationally include the Perry Pre-school program (USA). These programs include support provided to parents as well as periods of high quality childcare for the children in their early years. (for more information on early intervention programs see table 3.5 on page 145 of the *Pathways to Prevention* Report, National Crime Prevention publication 1999).

It is also important that there are programs that can assist families when their children are adolescents as well. Parenting support is needed across the lifespan of children and young people as family circumstances are dynamic and stable families can disintegrate later in their children's lives.

It is important that services that support young people with significant alcohol and other drug problems are well funded and equipped to provide significant aftercare programs where there are no other realistic adult supports in that young person's life. Longitudinal research has shown that young people who form significant attachments to teachers or other significant people during their lives even in the absence of family attachments have better mental health outcomes and form better attachments as adults than those young people who make no significant attachments during their adolescent years. (S.Wolff, The concept of resilience, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Dec;29(4):565-74. Review, 1995)

Cases of Serious family breakdown with the capacity for change

Many families that the Ted Noffs Foundation comes into contact with have the capacity for change. The Ted Noffs Foundation is able to provide family counselling and support for parents as well as the young people. In many cases while working with families, family reconciliation is achieved and young people are reconnected to their families.

Services that assist young people to overcome their alcohol and other drug problems need adequate funding to ensure that expert family therapy and counselling can be provided to young people and their families.

CASE STUDY 3

Tara, as told by her mother

Tara began to experiment with drugs due to curiosity and peer pressure. As her drug and alcohol use increased she changed. She made new friends and while we expected her to change during adolescence she rejected my concerns for her safety and I did not know what I could do. Police and Court involvement became the catalyst for change. Canberra did not have a drug and alcohol rehabilitation program for young people at this time so I sought help from the Ted Noffs Foundation.

Tara had to move to Sydney and entered the program after a 10 day detox program. The positive side was what the program offered and how Tara progressed and went from strength to strength. Over the three months she was with the program she learnt a lot about herself, her strengths and weaknesses. She was given the responsibility to choose how she would tackle the challenges offered to her. Living in a shared house during the program meant learning to respect each other and property, to work together to do the chores, cook the meals, and support each other through tough times. Her self-esteem was shattered from the D&A abuse and experiences she had gone through on the street. Living without drugs and alcohol was a huge ask, but she took it on.

An important part of the program was family and one-to-one counselling. This empowered us to look at underlying causes for why Tara wanted to "get out of

it every day". It was tough, but really worth it. I have never accepted nor will accept – "there's nothing you can do".

CASE STUDY 4

Janice

Janice believed heroin was bad for her but this did not stop her becoming dependent on heroin. Janice (not her real name) was 17 years old when she was referred to the Ted Noffs Foundation for help. She'd been in counselling for a while about other concerns but the drug stuff was new. She thought heroin was bad but it was better than the alternative. She spent up to \$300 dollars a day on her habit.

She began using when she was kicked out of school. Even though she was terrified of needles she started injecting. She believed that drugs were dangerous yet she still used them, why? There was too much stress in her life and Janice tried to use drugs to cope. She hadn't learned any other way to cope with the things she was feeling.

There were many things adding to her stress. Born in another English-speaking country she came to Australia when she was 10 years old. Her mother had family here and decided to move with her kids because their father was physically assaulting her.

Soon after, her father came to Australia and moved back in with them. This was difficult for Janice, it was difficult for everyone.

1998 was a hard year. Janice was in year 11. In the words of her mother, she joined the "in" crowd at school and started to worry about her weight". She began to argue with her friend even though, according to her mother, "she'd never lost her temper in her life". Then she hit a girl and she was kicked out of school. She lost face. She lost her friends. This made her feel things that were very difficult to deal with.

She made new friends and they used drugs. Using heroin made her feel good, it gave her confidence and allowed her to fit in with her new friends. She frequently gave in to their demands for heroin as she knew the pain her friends went through while hanging out. She was a pushover.

She always said she wouldn't steal to support her habit. She believed that dealing in heroin was a better. Even at the peak of her habit Janice still had a job. Yet her habit became so expensive that Janice started stealing.

Through counselling Janice found a way to understand her anger and then to control it. She's still working on ways to manage her sadness. She stopped using heroin. She did use a couple of times since quitting, but this was brief and through discussions with her counsellor she learnt a lot about herself when she used again.

She has begun the process of healing the damage done to her mother and sister. She plans to work on reconciling with her father but not until she's ready.

Importance of structured and holistic interventions

In cases of alcohol and other drug abuse short term, rapid interventions do not achieve results in the long term. For changes in alcohol and drug abuse to be enduring young people need to be in a stable and supportive relationship with a parent, family member or significant other person.

It is important that the families and young people are presented with a range of supports from services and their communities and that these are co-ordinated to ensure that support and advice they are receiving is consistent. To achieve this it is recommended that young people and families have a case manager who co-ordinates their access to and interactions with a range of government departments and other non-government services that are assisting them. If a family or young person has to deal with a range of services to get the assistance they need then it is beneficial if this is provided in a holistic and planned manner rather than the young person or family having to deal with each organisation separately and in an uncoordinated way.

Example of a policy being developed in New Zealand that is aiming to empower families

Strengthening Families and Whanau Approach

This is an evolving strategy in New Zealand at present: The key themes are

- *A partnership approach among government agencies, local government leaders, non –government organisations and communities.*
- *A focus on how policy is implemented, encouraging local solutions to local problems.*
- *Improving the quality of government services through collaboration, adaptation and innovation*
- *A focus on preventive approaches*
- *Starting with the family and its networks rather than provider structures*

Indigenous focus

It is acknowledged that the Maori population is over-represented amongst the disadvantaged population in New Zealand. Within the Strengthening Families and Whanau approach there is specific collaboration with the Maori community to include Maori approaches and to develop more co-ordinated and collaborative approaches to government's relationship with Maori-based organisations and communities. Mainstream services often do not understand complex cultural issues that affect the lives and family structures of indigenous people. It is hoped that this approach will address this issue and allow the family to be the focus of the intervention, rather than the service providers trying to impose their values and cultural beliefs onto the family inappropriately.

Ways that quality service delivery to vulnerable families whose young people are affected by alcohol and other drug use could be better provided.

- Increase funding and availability of early intervention measures to prevent adolescent alcohol and other drug abuse. Programs could include a schools based approach, identifying “at risk” young people early before high school or in the early years of high school. The Ted Noffs Foundation runs a

successful schools program in South Eastern Sydney that has been evaluated and has been shown to have successful outcomes.

- More co-ordination between services engaging young people and their families. A case manager could be assigned to young people and their family who then takes a lead role in co-ordinating service delivery to young people and families.
- Funding could be made available to provide adolescent specific detox services. Adult services are not appropriate for adolescents.
- An increase in funding for holistic, best practice treatment and rehabilitation programs for young people who have suffered from alcohol and other drug abuse problems, such as the Ted Noffs Foundation's Program for Adolescent Life Management (PALM).
- Funding could be provided to investigate the need for a co-ordinated approach to providing quality education and training for counsellors and psychologists to specialise in prevention, early intervention and treatment of alcohol and other drug problems for young people. There is a need for more trained and experienced people to work in this field.

Crime, Violence (including domestic violence) and law enforcement

Research has shown that there are significant correlations between crime and alcohol and other drug use. Whether one is a consequence of the other or they co-occur due to similar underlying risk factors is still a matter for debate.

On a practical level drug use can lead to property and violent offences when young people use crime as a method of raising the necessary money to support expensive illegal drug habits. Excessive alcohol use is also linked with an increase in violent offending, both in public settings as well as domestic violence.

In practice the Ted Noffs Foundation comes into contact with a significant number of young people who both abuse alcohol and or other drugs and also have been involved in crime including violent crime. As young people who have one of these issues as a presenting concern are also often involved in the other, it is necessary that interventions take account of this and assessments and case management plans assist young people to overcome both issues.

Programs such as the Youth Drug Court Trial about to commence in NSW in the Western suburbs of Sydney and the NSW Juvenile Justice Case Conferencing Program are important initiatives that aim to reduce the stigma and adverse social outcomes of young offenders in our community.

Community Perceptions

Community perceptions often do not contribute to solving the complex problem of alcohol or other drug abuse. Significant media attention is given to the issues of

young people and alcohol and other drug abuse and some of its perceived consequences such as crime for the community.

This media attention often portrays young people in a negative light. As a result young disadvantaged people have their options reduced and are sometimes further disadvantaged by defensive community responses to their use of public space.

Young people in the community need to be provided with safe, free venues to conduct their social activities. Young people are often excluded from recreational space that is highly structured and expensive to use.

Including young people in community activities in a structured and supervised way may help to reduce alcohol and other drug use and encourage young people to feel included in social and community activities.

Often interesting and educative community cultural events are out of young people's and disadvantaged communities' reach because of the cost and location of these events. This creates the need for young people to use public space for their social gatherings. When the use of this public space is restricted this may lead young people to consider themselves excluded from the mainstream community and therefore become disrespectful of public space.

There are some examples of constructive initiatives from within the community to provide young people with free use of sporting facilities and structured activities that include cultural events. Examples of these include Police and Citizens youth Clubs, sporting organisations where adults volunteer their time such as AUS kick the AFL junior competition and free community cultural events provided by local, state and federal governments such as Australia Day Celebrations or Corroboree 2000 or the Festival of the Kites at Bondi Beach each September.

Other initiatives that provide young people with constructive cultural activities that are inclusive of young people and their achievements include the Rock Estedford and the promotion of the annual exhibition of the best of the Higher School Certificate Art at the NSW Art Gallery.

The Commonwealth Government could be involved in constructive campaigns to help promote the provision of free structured and supervised activities to the young people of our communities to assist them to participate in mainstream activities at no or low cost.

Health Care Costs

Research in the US (RAND) has shown that early intervention reduces costs to the community later on. (This is discussed in detail on page 42 of the *Pathways to Prevention* Report, National Crime Prevention publication 1999).

Those young people from dysfunctional and economically disadvantaged families are over represented in detention centres and high users of health services at the tertiary end of the spectrum. Earlier intervention for these young people and their families could save significant amounts of money in the long term.

The Ted Noffs Foundation clinical staff have noted that young people who have court orders, stating that treatment is a compulsory course of action that is preventing them from going to a detention centre or back to court, have better retention rates in treatment than young people who enter treatment without such an order. The evaluation of the Ted Noffs Foundation PALM program showed the program to be cost effective when compared to detention. Diversion to the health system (where appropriate) at an early point in a young persons contact with the justice system is cost saving.