

Response to:

Inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on

After 8 years of heroin addiction and multi-drug use (including ice) our daughter has been free of substance use for two years, has resumed study, and has a caring partner. From this comfortable, but not complacent position the following are reflections on the effect of serious and disabling drug use on the family. *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (a standard text) refers to substance use disorders as a mental disorder. Our family considered our daughter was sick and as a caring family we wanted to help her recover from her illness. At onset of serious and disabling drug use the GP gave the following comment (I paraphrase):

'In ten years from onset of serious drug use 30% of users will be clean, 30% still using and 30% dead'

This knowledge focused our family to help the daughter in her recovery.

1 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

Financial Impact

Loss or income

- I left the workforce for a number of years to take on the caring role for members of my family

Private health insurance

- We maintained maximum private health cover for our daughter

Private detox and rehab

- We accessed private facilities twice because of the lack of success in public facilities

Paying debts

- I have on a rare occasion paid debts where our daughter's life and security were under threat

Total financial cost

- Incalculable

Social and Personal Cost

Time

- Time spent in research into addiction, available detoxification and rehabilitation centres, methods used, successful treatments offered overseas etc.
- Considerable time with our daughter in social and family related activities encouraging participation

Effects on siblings

- One child became seriously depressed mainly because of her inability to make our daughter well
- The other sibling lost focus, left school early, worked in lowly paid unskilled employment, did not complete her education and became a major marijuana user. Five years passed in this way before she accessed further education and gained stability in her life. Inflexibility of government agencies made their services unavailable. Small NGOs gave some help but were limited by funding
- Emotional and long term cost - incalculable

Effects on parents

- Supporting all children and trying to remain a 'normal' family has taken its toll. Hobbies and interests were put on hold - in effect drug addiction became our hobby
- Family turned inward as a means of support
- Accessed non-government peer led services for the assistance when they were found
- Emotional cost - incalculable

Response to: Inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families

Stigma and society

- Substance use disorder like mental health disorders are stigmatised
- Families who are affected are drawn into that discrimination
- Other siblings were, on occasion 'tarred with the same brush' as our drug using daughter
- The most non-stigmatising group of people were young people and other families undergoing similar issues
- The media is unhelpful in perpetuating and encouraging negative attitudes to those who resort to drug use and their families

Stigma and professionals

- Some excellent, caring professionals treated my family with respect and kindness
- There is widespread discrimination against people who do not present well, can be abusive and look unkempt and that discrimination can be extended to their families
- Ignorance in those we turn to for help is very disturbing

Professional assistance

- Kindness and empathy from some professionals but little practical help
- Barriers to accessing government services
- Inability of professionals to understand the issues (following some professional advice could have destroyed the carefully maintained and fragile relationship with our daughter)
- Contact with the professionals made us rely on ourselves the family to be the major help for our substance-using daughter

2 The impact of harm minimisation programs on families

Free needle exchange, methadone program

- Harm reduction programmes kept our daughter alive
- The clean needle and syringe program kept her free of HIV infection
- The methadone program gave her interludes of stability, and more normal patterns of behaviour
- The acceptance of methadone by professionals as a drug useful in stabilizing drug users and reducing their drug use as well as assisting in total abstinence has been a great step forward.

Injecting rooms

- If safe injecting rooms had been available in our state they would have helped our drug-using daughter
- Injecting rooms would have provided some reassurance to her family that at times she was safe and had contact with professionals who were able to help her move away from substance use

Education

- Education in schools about substance use behaviour may be effective if it is monitored and evaluated on a regular basis
- The education available 10 years ago had no effect

Harm minimisation

- Introduce free drug testing at major events where drug use is anticipated
- Review evidence based research from overseas and implement programmes in Australia

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

Overall objective

- Help families provide the caring role - as with other illness and disability

Family education

Response to: Inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families

- Provide effective cheap or no-cost education programmes for parents and family members throughout Australia where there is a substance user
- Programmes to include education about drugs and dependency, mental health and the 'stages of change'
- Fund and roll out one such programme, the 'Stepping Stones' project, throughout Australia

Family support

- Extend and finance Family Drug Support telephone line delivered by volunteer workers 24 hours a day
- Provide and fund room space and advertising for family peer support meetings

Direct access to services

- Fund NGO to provide flexibility, available service delivery to families (large government agencies lack flexibility)

Detox and rehabs

- Fund a variety of types and styles of services throughout Australia
- Accept that as with smoking it takes a number of visits to detox and rehab to give up substance use
- Produce one website with current information about service provision in all detoxes and rehabs in Australia
- Provide an area on the website where substance users can comment on their experiences of specific detox and rehab facilities
- Provide travel grants for rural and remote people to access services
- Provide guaranteed payment of rental while individuals are receiving treatment in rehabs and detoxes

Post substance abuse debt

- Due to fines incurred while using drugs many past users have large debts (eg housing, electricity, court fines etc)
- Past drug users have lost years of productive work or study
- Find alternative ways to pay the financial debt (eg community work) using their experiences (while not putting them at risk)

Professional education

- Educate journalists, magistrates, politicians, police, medical professionals and all who speak out on drug addiction and deal with affected people in the 'stages of change'
- Mandatory mental health and substance use training for GP's