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STANDING COMMITTEE ON FAMILY AND HUMAN SERVICES INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF ILLICIT DRUG USE ON FAMILIES

Submission/Response

Palmerston Association Inc is a longstanding provider of support services to people affected by drug use. Our services include a residential program, individual and family counselling, parent support groups, training, education and community development.

Palmerston agrees with the views presented by our peak body WANADA and the National peak body ADCA in their submissions. As a treatment agency with a major focus on supporting families we also offer the following observations:

Terms of Reference

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

A significant proportion of social and personal costs to families are influenced by the stigmatisation of illicit drug use in the community. We observe that many families affected by illicit drug use problems have very human responses to this stigmatisation which reduce their likelihood of seeking help. These responses include:

- Shame
- A sense of having failed
- Shock
- Bewilderment
- Feelings of disempowerment

At the social level we observe these responses leading to withdrawal from the community, family and other support networks.

At the personal level we observe these responses leading to anxiety, depression anger and conflict between family members.

These responses observed by Palmerston point to a need for services to target families in prevention, information and service marketing campaigns with the aim of attracting families in need to support and treatment services.

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In the case of families where parental figures use illicit drugs, we have observed that there are personal costs to children. These costs are:

- Desensitization to illicit drug use and increased risk of becoming a drug user
- Poor social skill development, particularly interpersonal skills
- Low self esteem

We are aware that ADCA has presented evidence which supports our observations about costs to children and we wish to add our view that low self esteem stemming from poor social skill development is a critical factor which stems itself from the low self esteem and poor social skills of illicit drug using parents. Put simply, we have observed a dynamic where illicit drug using parents use drugs to manage challenging personal experiences and pass this form of coping behavior onto their children. We see this as a major cost to the children of drug using parents: the lack of opportunity to learn the very skills which may afford them protection against illicit drug use.

These two key observations about costs to families suggest the need for targeted strategies which will be addressed under the third term of reference.

The impact of harm minimisation programs on families

Palmerston Association adopts a systemic family therapy perspective in its services to families. This perspective includes the whole family, including the user, in any treatment initiative and has a strong evidence base as an effective therapy. In our view the systemic approach is a harm minimisation strategy in the form of harm reduction since it advocates support of the **whole** family system from the first contact with the agency. In particular it does not seek to exclude family members from systemic treatment including those who may be using illicit drugs. In this sense it recognizes two key points:

1. All family members are affected by AOD problems and may need support - and that this support can be delivered effectively by working with the whole family together. This is referred to as family counselling.
2. Working at a deeper systemic level with families, including the use of therapeutic interventions which amongst other goals seek to modify mutually dependent behaviour within the family dynamic and can bring about significant change which addresses the incidence and impact of drug use on the family unit. This is referred to as family therapy and it is recognized that specific family therapy skills are required to work at this level.

Evaluation of our family work indicates that working systemically is effective at a number of levels:

- At the very least it allows us to deliver targeted education to a whole family
- It assists parents to gain knowledge, set goals, make decisions and participate in peer support activities
- It improves family relationships particularly the communication between family members
- It enables an empowering 'all of family response' to illicit drug use problems
- It allows family and individual drug counselling to occur concurrently

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Considering this we believe that harm minimisation in the form of a systemic approach has a positive, supportive and effective impact on families. We stress that this view does not in any way minimise the response to drug use, but rather, addresses it in the context of a broad education, support and treatment program.

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

Palmerston Association agrees strongly with the philosophy which informs this question and has identified three effective strategies to strengthen families. These are:

1. A 'collective wisdom' approach to parent support initiatives which encourages parents to build peer relationships based on the sharing of solutions to family problems in a supportive group setting. The collective wisdom of parents in the groups is recognized and shared in an empowering process. A good example of wisdom shared is insight into the mutual dependencies we often observe in families.
2. A philosophy of 'Bringing Families and Professionals Together' which aims to demystify treatment approaches and educate families in such areas as drug harms, treatment options, theoretical perspectives and in particular, perspectives of family dynamics.

This latter point involves therapists working with families to pass on knowledge of family therapy perspectives with the aim of empowering (strengthening) the family to address the impact of drug use on the family and make effective decisions. Qualitative evaluation indicates that families are helped by this post modern approach and feel empowered by it.

The therapist's skill is a key element of this approach and we strongly recommend investment in family work (therapy) skills to ensure this effective means of strengthening families is fully supported.

3. Targeting the children of drug users in small group education focused on self esteem building topics such as communication skills, social and interpersonal skills. This preventative strategy if adequately resource is a powerful tool and has the potential to strengthen the young and most vulnerable family members, and also the future families they will create.

These strategies are variations on the theme of using the systemic approach to strengthen families affected by illicit drug use. In conclusion, we believe this to be the way of the future and would like to emphasise our earlier point that working systemically with families can bring about significant change which addresses the incidence and impact of drug use on the family. To achieve this we believe that families affected by illicit drug use need to be able to easily access well resourced programs informed by the systemic approach.

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