



Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform (ACT) Inc.

committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use

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NEWSLETTER

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Next Meeting

Thursday November 22nd

at St Ninian's Uniting Church

Cnr Mouat & Brigalow Sts, Lyneham

7.30pm

**Annual General Meeting
and discussion on future strategies.**

Editorial

This will be the last newsletter for 2001. My President's Annual Report along with the Treasurer's Annual Report will be presented at the meeting on 22nd November. Although much work has been done during 2001 it is disappointing that progress is so slow and that under a third Howard Government it is unlikely that we will see heroin trials or indeed much progress away from punishing those addicted rather than treating them. We are pleased that the referendum on drugs in the ACT we defeated. We look forward to working with the new Assembly. We are also pleased with the more humane approaches that are now occurring in most states of Australia due mostly to changes in governments or changes in governmental attitudes.

Our next meeting will be Thursday 28th February 2002.

A Happy and safe Christmas to all our members!

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The federal election is now over and the dust is settling. As the dust settles we see that little has changed. A few new MPs will appear and a few old ones will fade away but we are left with the same Prime Minister who personally vetoed the heroin trial because it would "send the wrong message" and a person, despite his rhetoric about being compassionate, does not show it in his actions.

He shows little understanding for the drug user or the families that are trying to deal with drug issues. Nor is he willing to look for alternate approaches that might make a difference. He seems determined to doggedly follow the USA in this issue.

Recall the meagre trickle of funds to treatment or to family programs compared to the gush of funds to law enforcement and the lack of evidence to support his policies. Recall also the booklet on drugs. Did the taxpayer get value for money from his booklet mailed out to all households? Has it made a difference?

However having said that, our task is to work with the government that we have, and try to persuade it that there is a better way - an approach that uses evidence as a basis for its drug policies, an approach that will reduce the harm that drugs do to individuals and to society.

It is not for us to pack up our tent and go home at this stage. While countries such as Britain are moving forward (see article from the BBC in this newsletter) we must ensure that we do not slide backwards - the harm minimisation strategy, a feature of Australian drug policy is under threat to this ideologically driven government, despite strong support from the professionals and the bureaucracy.

We will need to review our strategies and to best use the assets that we possess. We need to work with the media to our best advantage. Our personal stories and our experiences are our strongest assets. Then there are the skills that each of us have - and we all have skills that are valuable - whether they be in organising, public speaking, writing letters and articles, or simply speaking to the people that we know.

Whatever our skills and abilities we will need to use them over the next three years. It is possible that our best strategy may be to increase the number of people who are persuaded to our point of view and political opinion may just follow our lead. But we will need to be persistent over the next three years.

Last Meeting with Rolf Ericsson from the Swedish Embassy.

Rolf's talk to the meeting in October was very well prepared and very informative. We all now have a better understanding of the Swedish drug policy. It is obvious that culture and history of that country played a big part in forming their policy.

We have asked Rolf to email a copy of his presentation so that we may put it on our website. At the meeting he undertook to take two questions on notice in respect of the Swedish laws and application of those laws. We look forward to his response on those matters.

Workshop on Good Practice in Drug Policy - a brief summary by John Ley

The well attended Workshop, organised by the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia in Sydney on 1 November, 2001, was opened by NSW Special *Minister of State John Della Bosca MLC*, who has responsibility for the implementation of the Government's program arising from the 1999 Drug Summit. He said that the Summit and its outcomes involved a partnership between Parliament, the Government, health professionals and the community. There are 400 discrete projects, underpinned by \$176 million, aimed at improving treatment and prevention. The

projects involve, but also lead, the community. Some new approaches are being trialed. There are also 'tough new law enforcement actions against dealers'.

Each project is being evaluated. The results so far indicate fewer drug-related deaths and improved community attitudes. In Cabramatta, 'the heroin drought has produced a dramatic fall in heroin use and a near doubling of those in methadone treatment in the first two months of 2001'. The Minister said that the community is looking for better evidence to support arguments. 'We must communicate at the rational and scientific level, taking account of community emotions', he said, acknowledging, also, that there is a dynamic tension between the various players in the drug field - such as government and the researchers. Mr Della Bosca concluded by noting that the positive aspects concerning drug issues are very hard to get out to the community.

Prof. Ian Webster, ADCA President, said that ADCA relies on an electronic network regarding drug policy, and that ADCA is linked up with 12 other peak bodies. There is a need for drug consumers to be involved in developing policy. Political bipartisanship, to the extent possible, is needed. He said that drug policies should be broadly based and holistic - eg they should take account of the fact that Aboriginal drug issues are linked with education, general health, and other fundamental matters, and that there is an international element as well. Prof Webster said that we should be careful about the words we use; that social justice principles should be integrated into drug policy; and that we should adopt a long term approach and seek sustainability in policies and programs. He concluded by saying that in the last 5 years, non-government organisations (NGOs) have become much more involved and effective in the drug policy area at the national level.

Other speakers included Victorians **Prof David Penington**, who spoke of his personal experiences in developing policies on AIDS and drugs, and **Dr John Fitzgerald**, Melbourne University criminologist. Both emphasised the importance of putting the evidence to the community, thus involving it in the policy development process; and of having good advisory structures to reduce and manage conflict. Messrs **Geoff Barnden**, Director of Drug Policy, NSW and **Terry Murphy**, Executive Director, WA Abuse Strategy Office, gave comprehensive presentations about the development of drug policy in their respective States focussing particularly on the Drug Summits that have been held - in 1999, in NSW and in 2001, in WA. The NSW Summit involved all State parliamentarians, as well as drug practitioners and community representatives, whereas the WA summit excluded parliamentarians. Both summits were largely successful, though the inclusion of politicians seemed to be an advantage. (In 1999 the NSW Government had been in office for 4 years, however, and was probably in a stronger position than the new WA one, in 2001, to involve all politicians).

There were three concurrent Working Exercises held in the afternoon. These covered, *Evidence-based Policy: Turning Research into Policy; Government, Non-Government Organisations and the National Drug Strategy*; and *The Politics of Drugs and the Media*. I attended the second of these, which produced thoughtful discussion. A major focus was on the Blair Government's official declaration about the roles of Government and the NGOs in the UK,

which was thought to be a constructive framework for NGOs to work effectively in partnership with government.

The addresses given at the Workshop and the subsequent discussion showed the breadth and depth of the research and reform that is occurring across Australia. In NSW, Victoria and WA, especially, it appears substantial progress is being made.

The process of reform is obviously very important, and I believe we in the ACT can draw ideas from these States about how best to encourage Government to move forward in Canberra.

Remembrance Ceremony

The ceremony was held on Monday 29th November. Over 100 people attended including religious leaders, police officers and politicians. We hope those families attending found it a time of comfort and support.

We thank the speakers, Donald Denoon, Annette Ellis (MP) and Lama Rigzin, Buddhist Monk. The speeches of Donald Denoon and Annette Ellis should be on our website shortly. We also thank the choir "Certaine Notes" and the Drug Referral and Information Centre for their help and support and to all Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform members who helped and brought refreshments.

The day was fine and sunny and the tree was blossoming perfectly.

Even though we are experiencing a heroin drought, seven names of those who had died in 2001 were amongst the other 92 names remembered at the ceremony.

Congratulations to Geoff Page

Geoff Page, a Canberra poet and strong supporter of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform, has recently been selected as the winner of the Patrick White Award for this year. The award is made to writers who, in the opinion of the award committee, have not been given adequate recognition. Congratulations Geoff. A well deserved award.

Invitation to the launch of Geoff's latest book

Geoff is also having his new book of poems launched by Roger McDonald at 5:30pm on 22 November and invites all members of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform to attend. You will have time to attend the launch and then come to our AGM.

His new book, his 14th book of poetry, is entitled "Darker & Lighter" and is published by Five Islands Press. It contains a number of poems about heroin addiction.

The launch will be held at Bazaar Cafe, 38 Sydney Ave, Forest, ACT.

We were sorry to hear that Anne Edgeworth, a member of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform, was recently involved in a serious car accident. She is presently recuperating and we are told she is in good spirits. We wish her well and hope to see her back at meetings soon.

Stepping Stones to Success Training Course: 7-9 December

Family Drug Support will be conducting a 'Stepping Stones to Success' training course on 7 – 9 December. A weekend experiential course to help family members cope with drug and alcohol issues. This course is for family members who have a drug using member and is intended to assist the family to grow and adapt and to shift the focus from problems to solutions

When: Friday 7th Dec, 5:30pm – 9pm
Saturday 8th & Sunday 9th Dec, 9:30am – 5pm

Where: Calvary Hospital

Applications: FDS, PO Box 226, Willoughby NSW 2068, Be sure to include name, address and contact telephone number.

Especially for Victorian Members

Family Drug Help in Victoria

We have just received the October issue of Family Drug Help's Newsletter which aims to provide relevant, up-to-date information to the Families and friends of people who use alcohol and/or drugs in a problematic way. The group was officially launched by the Victorian Premier and Health Minister in March this year and receives funding from the Victorian Government.

The funding helps provide the Family Drug Helpline 1300 660 068 at 24 hour, 7 day a week telephone service where trained volunteers work in tandem with professional counsellors to provide support, information and referral to people seeking help on a family member or friends drug use. Family information and support groups meet regularly in several locations throughout Victoria.

For more information telephone 03 9572 2855.

Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation AGM

A notice has been received of the ADLRF AGM to be held at 6:30pm on Tuesday 27 Nov 2001 at the Parkes Room, Parliament House NSW, Macquarie St Sydney.

All Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform members are welcome to attend.

World AIDS Day

The AIDS Action Council is asking for your help this World AIDS Day, Saturday 1 Dec. World AIDS day is recognised across the world on Dec 1 every year. It is a time to remember those who have died from AIDS, learn more about HIV/AIDS, and care about the 36 million people worldwide who are living with this condition.

You can help by placing a box of red ribbons in your workplace to raise money or displaying the Notional World AIDS Day promotional and awareness raising materials

Inquiries to AIDS Action Council in the ACT (6257 2855).

Cannabis laws set to be eased

Tue, 23 Oct 2001, Source: BBC News (UK Web)

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Home Secretary David Blunkett has announced he wants the UK's laws covering cannabis to be eased so possession will no longer be an arrestable offence The drug would

remain illegal under Mr Blunkett's proposals but be reclassified from a class 'B' to a class 'C' drug.

The aim is to free police to concentrate on harder drugs and improve current legislation so it will "make more sense" to people on the street, he said. In a parallel move, licensing of cannabis derivatives for medical use - such as the relief of multiple sclerosis symptoms - will be given government backing if current trials prove successful. Cannabis possession and supply would remain a criminal offence, attracting maximum sentences of five years for supply and two years for possession.

But rather than arresting people caught with cannabis, police will be more likely to issue a warning, a caution or a court summons. Mr Blunkett announced the shift while giving evidence to the House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee. He told MPs: "To have credible policy in treatment and harm minimisation and above all consistency in law enforcement and policing, we believe it is right to look at the re-categorisation of cannabis.

"I shall therefore be putting to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs a proposal that we should re-categorise cannabis to 'C' rather than 'B', thereby allowing police to concentrate their resources on class 'A' drugs - crack-cocaine and heroin in particular - and to ensure that whilst they are able to deal with those pushing and dealing in drugs in exactly the same way as they can at the moment, it will both lighten their load and make more sense on the streets than it does at the moment."

Mr Blunkett said the re-categorisation was supported by the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir John Stevens, and "many of those engaged in law enforcement across the country". Re-categorisation of cannabis was one of the recommendations in a Police Foundation report by Lady Runciman last year, roundly rejected by the government at the time. Mr Blunkett said he would not be following her other calls to downgrade LSD and ecstasy as well. And he added that he was not in favour of either de-criminalising or legalising cannabis, particularly as debate on its status as a "gateway" to harder drugs was so far inconclusive.

Lady Runciman called the home secretary's move "very sensible and welcome". "It will make the law much more credible with a much more accurate hierarchy of drugs," she said. Mr Blunkett could look forward to almost certain approval for the change from the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, Lady Runciman added.

Conservative former home secretary Ann Widdecombe said she was concerned it could signal a more tolerant attitude towards cannabis and become a "dealer's charter". Former health minister Jon Owen Jones, whose bill to legalise cannabis comes before the House of Commons on Friday, said: "This is the first step towards a sensible drug policy as well as an acknowledgment that the present policies are not working."

'Attitudes will change' Mike Goodman, director of national drug and alcohol advice charity Release, called it "a Berlin Wall-type development" likely to herald many changes in society's attitude to drugs. The Medical Marijuana Co-operative, a group campaigning for cannabis to be prescribed for medical conditions, called Mr Blunkett's announcement "decriminalisation through the back door". Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman Simon Hughes said: "The announcement on cannabis is welcome but it is extraordinary that it has taken so long."

The Conservatives, undergoing a detailed policy review, said they had "noted" Mr Blunkett's announcement.

CAN'T QUIT, WON'T QUIT

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Author: Lead Editorial

What many addicts need is a safe supply of drugs

THE WORLD may be on the brink of a recession, but for one business prospects have never been brighter. World heroin production has tripled in ten years, and cocaine production doubled. Hard drugs are no longer the preserve of the affluent. A hundred years ago the typical opiate addict in the West was a middle-class woman in her forties. Now it's a young, uneducated male. Even nicotine continues to enjoy steady global growth, as people in the developing world embrace the habit.

Despite all the health campaigns and the billions spent on law enforcement, there are more addicts living today than at any time in modern history. Governments hooked on "zero tolerance"

policies are condemned to locking up ever more drugs offenders, and footing the soaring bill for the crimes they commit-or in the case of smokers, the medical treatments they need.

There has to be a better way, and it's there for the asking-the alternative philosophy of harm reduction, in which the aim is not necessarily to wrench addicts away from their drug, but to minimise the harm drugs do to users and society. Take nicotine. What kills smokers is not the drug they are addicted to but all the disease-causing gunk in the smoke they inhale to get their fix. The good news is that there are now much safer ways of taking nicotine; the bad is that governments are failing to ensure these products are taken up.

Across Europe, for instance, cigarettes containing all sorts of untested additives continue to be sold. Yet a comparatively safe form of chewing tobacco is banned (see p 28).

Even more bizarrely, governments still lack the power to compel cigarette manufacturers to make their products safer. A method already exists, for example, to reduce the levels of cancer-causing nitrosamines in tobacco smoke, and major manufacturers are said to be interested. The catch is they want to continue selling all their usual brands and market the new cigarettes as being "safer". This is like car manufacturers demanding the right to sell cars with and without seat belts in the name of consumer choice.

The difference is that governments can insist on seat belts, but not on specific safety measures for cigarettes. Acquiring such powers should be an urgent priority.

It's not so very different with heroin addiction. As with nicotine, the dangers have been massively distorted. Heroin does not rot your brain or body: if heroin addicts look haggard and thin, it's because they're spending every waking moment worrying where their next fix is coming from, and spending their last cent on black market drugs rather than food. True, many heroin users lead risky lives. But this is mostly due to the unhygienic and dangerous conditions in which the drug is bought. Forced to go to criminals, addicts pay excessive prices for erratic supplies that are likely to be bulked up with harmful substances. Recently heroin has turned up on the streets containing the nerve toxin scopolamine, a deadly Clostridium bacterium and even anthrax spores.

Worse, addicts soon learn how to eke out their erratic supplies by mixing heroin with other drugs. And it's this-not the heroin itself-that kills most addicts. To take a typical set of figures, out of 84 deaths linked to opiate abuse in Dublin in 1999, 73 victims had two or more drugs in their body. And a majority of the victims had no remnants of heroin in them at all, only methadone, the substitute drug that's often prescribed to addicts to wean them off heroin.

The answer seems obvious. If the black market is the source of harm and methadone is more dangerous than heroin (as the evidence increasingly suggests), why not let doctors prescribe "clean" heroin? Switzerland, the Netherlands and Germany are already piloting the approach, and even Britain is now quietly licensing doctors to prescribe heroin to addicts who seem unable to give up. But such schemes are limited in number and are still bitterly opposed by many politicians and anti-drugs campaigners. At best, they are tolerated rather than enthusiastically endorsed.

This is a pity, but hardly surprising. Addiction is never a good thing and nearly everyone has some moral qualms about it. But the fact is that some people will always seek out drugs and there are no miracle cures for addiction on the horizon. For now, harm reduction is the best strategy we have.

For too long we've been forcing addicts to choose between prison, abstinence or therapy. What many of them really need is the drug of their choice, supplied to them in the safest possible way.



Keynote speakers, Marion & Brian McConnell, at the Rural GP Alcohol & Other Drug Conference Orange, 3 Nov 2001