



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

committed to preventing tragedy that arises from illicit drug use

PO Box 36, HIGGINS ACT 2615, Telephone (02) 6254 2961

Email mcconnell@ffdlr.org.au Web www.ffdlr.org.au

NEWSLETTER

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Next Meeting

Thursday, April 25th

**at St Ninians Uniting Church,
Cnr Brigalow and Mouat Streets,**

Lyneham

7.30pm

Topic: Part 2 of strategies for getting our message across.

A cuppa will follow the meeting giving a time for informal chat.

Editorial

Our March meeting generated a great deal of discussion on the strategies we should use to best convey our objectives. As with all good discussions it was vigorous and constructive and it continues to be ongoing. Those attending the meeting agreed to continue the discussion via an email list.

There was insufficient time to consider our media strategy at that meeting so we decided to look at this strategy at our next meeting.

In this newsletter I have included an article that was published recently in the Canberra Times which interestingly drew a response from the Minister for Justice and Customs. His letter is also included.

However it does not report objectively on the drug issue and the uninitiated reader might believe that the government's tough on drugs strategy is making a significant difference. Without a full and objective evaluation we will never know.

For an exercise read the senator's letter carefully and analyse it for adequacy as a response to the published article. ...ed

Winning the headlines but losing the war

John Howard might take comfort from the current heroin drought, argues Brian McConnell, but things are different on the streets.

Published in the Canberra Times 8/4/2002.

Australia's heroin drought is unique. No other country in the world is experiencing a shortage of heroin.

The Federal Government claims credit for the drought, stating that the law enforcement effort funded by the Tough on Drugs Strategy has been responsible. Large seizures of heroin are pointed to as proof.

Not unlike claims of the United Nations Drug Control Program which, in 1998, applauded reduction efforts of opium but which it said a year later was "largely as a result of extreme weather conditions in some major producer countries in South-West and South-East Asia". (UNDCP report, 1999).

Weather in Australia's heroin supply area may also have been a major factor. There was major flooding followed by severe frosts in the Burma region during the 2000 growing season.

Seizures of drugs at our border, no matter what the quantity, represent only a small portion of drugs arriving in our country. The national Crime Authority advised that heroin seizures amounted to only 12 percent - hardly enough to cause a severe supply shortage. Seizure amounts are indicators of the quantity on our streets, ie, for every 12kg seized, 88kg reached the streets.

The effect of the drought on the drug scene has been mixed. On the positive side, heroin overdoses and overdose deaths, which started to trend down before the shortage impacted, plummeted even further. Some users sought treatment. All are welcome outcomes.

Others continued with heroin and paid the higher price of the reduced supply. Others switched to alternate drugs, such as methamphetamine (speed) and cocaine to fill the void.

These drugs come with their own problems. Treatment of users is more difficult and their use is often associated with violence.

Violent crime is a large part of the increase

Crime has increased along with heroin prices, and, alarmingly, violent crime is a large part of that increase. The NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research recently reported a 34 per cent increase in "steal from person".

The positive reduction in heroin overdoses has been counterbalanced by increases in quantity and variety of other drugs, increases in violent crimes, increases in profits to organised crime and perhaps giving it a stronger grip on the drug market. On balance, one would have to question whether there has been a net gain for society. The drug problem has not been solved by the reduced supply of only one drug. We now have different problems and some would argue, a worse problem for society.

But what of the heroin trial raised by Chief Minister Stanhope last week and again rejected by Prime Minister John Howard? Some will argue that the shortage of heroin means that such a trial is unnecessary.

This could not be further from the truth. Firstly there are signs of heroin's return. Secondly the provision of heroin

on prescription would cause some users to change back to heroin and effective treatment from the more aggressive drugs. And thirdly there has never been a drug policy option that shows such promise of reducing crime (as has been done in Switzerland and the Netherlands) and undermining the black market.

The heroin trial has been nipping at Howard's heels since he personally vetoed it in 1997. His refusal to consider a heroin trial, clinging desperately to his claim that "it will send the wrong message", is obstinate and contrary to evidence. It ignores the support of more than 60 experts and peak bodies and the benefits for the community through reduced crime.

How a government treats the most marginalised in the community is a mark of its compassion. But compassion, like heroin, seems to be in short supply.

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The above article provoked a letter to the editor of The Canberra Times from Senator Chris Ellison, Minister for Justice and Customs (published on 16 April). Read his letter carefully and see if you can identify the flaws and misdirections. I have numbered the paragraphs for reference purposes. ed

Present policy on drugs is the right one

1. Brian O'Connell in "Winning the headlines but losing the war" (CT, April 8, p.11) is quite right: Australia's heroin drought is unique. However, his assertion that the Government's successful reduction of illicit drugs hitting our streets is creating "worse problems" is wrong.
2. It is only in an environment of reduced supply that we can successfully treat addicts and educate young Australians against the dangers of drugs.
3. In carefully laying the ground to support his argument, Mr O'Connell paid only lip service to the positive effects of the record funds the Howard Government has invested in protecting Australians from the scourge of illicit-drug use.
4. Since the "tough on drugs" strategy we launched in 1997, almost six tonnes of illicit drugs, including heroin, ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamines, have been seized, compared to 2.5 tonnes in the preceding five years. Central to any successful anti-drugs policy is a strong and definitive message from government that it will not tolerate the abuse and use of drugs.
5. More importantly, Mr O'Connell ignores the hundreds of Australian lives being saved each year by current strategies.
6. Heroin-overdose deaths among 15- to 44-year-olds decreased from 958 in 1999 to 725 in 2000. Early indications for 2001 are that an even greater reduction in heroin-overdose deaths has occurred, with Victorian figures indicating there were 49 deaths from heroin overdose in 2001, compared to 331 in 2000 – an 85 percent reduction.
7. There have also been improvements in access to treatment, with a census of drug treatment services showing an increase in the proportion of people in treatment for drug and alcohol problems since 1995.
8. The 2001 National Illicit Drugs Campaign, which encouraged parents to talk to their children about drugs,

found that 49 per cent of young 5- to 17-year-olds stated that the campaign had made it easier to talk to their parents about drugs.

9. Support for prescription heroin trials provides for an inadequate and counterproductive response to what should be our ultimate goal – to rid our young people of the life-destroying dangers and temptations presented by the availability of drugs in our neighbourhoods.

(Senator) Chris Ellison
Minister for Justice
And Customs

Para 1: Writer's name is wrong.

Para 2: This is illogical. Treatment and education are not dependent on reduced supply.

Para 3: The effect of the Tough on Drugs Strategy has been evaluated a number of times and there has been little to show that it has been effective. It is not a matter of how much money is thrown at the problem; it is how effective that money has been used. The test is of how many lives have been saved that can be directly attributed to the money spent and/or the reduction in drug use that can be attributed.

Para 4: He has not addressed the issue of what proportion this 6 tonnes represents and he shows seizures increasing over time when drug availability also increased over that time. That is the seizures may be a constant percentage of the amount coming into Australia and because more is coming in more is seized. It could be put in context by assuming (based on National Crime Authority estimates) that it represents about 12 per cent of the drugs reaching the street. Thus in the time that 6 tonnes were seized 50 tonnes could have reached the street. The growth in seizures most likely represents the growth in drugs reaching the street. The Government needs to investigate this.

Para 5 & 6: The reduction in overdoses was acknowledged and welcomed. But whether this reduction is attributable to the TOD strategy is questionable and requires investigation.

Para 7: The increase in people in treatment could also reflect the increased number of addicts and thus the increased demand for treatment. Again more research is needed.

Para 8: The surveying of children as young as 5 is a curious inclusion. Statistics for ages 12 to 17 would be more informative. It was a very expensive campaign which went to every household just to make it easier for 5-17 year olds to talk about drugs with their parents. The result of the survey after the advertising campaign in the senator's letter only quotes 5-17 year olds. No results from parents was included in the letter – what did they say? The critical question to ask is "did it reduce or delay uptake of drug use?"

Para 9: Support for a heroin trial is an evidence-based approach which the Minister does not appear to subscribe to. The reasons for conducting a heroin trial have been spelled out but ignored. The support of more than 60 experts and peak bodies has also been ignored by the government.

The letter is not convincing that the TOD Strategy has done much to rid Australia of the drugs in our neighbourhoods.

There are many concerns unanswered in this letter: What of the increase in amphetamines? What of the control of the drug market by organised crime, an issue the National Crime Authority thought so serious in its 2000 Commentary? What of the violent crime increase and increase in use of hand guns for those crimes?

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Drugs – Illegal or otherwise?

By Anne Edgeworth

These days the word 'Drug' has sinister overtones, thanks to the demonisation of one drug in particular over the past five decades.

Humans have taken drugs since time immemorial, and now, more than ever, there is an enormous range of drugs available, ranging from those you can buy in any shopping centre: alcohol, tobacco, pain-killers, vitamin pills, vegetable extracts, to thousands of drugs available on prescription.

For the majority of citizens in this country hardly a day goes by without imbibing a drug of some kind or other without even thinking about it. Some, like alcohol and tobacco are addictive. Their sales are restricted on grounds of age but they are not illegal.

Alcohol was declared illegal in the United States in the 1920s and enforced for a number of years before finally being repealed in the 1930s. Prohibition not only proved to be ineffectual, but as well as giving rise to all kinds of dangerous hooch for consumption, it was responsible for the rapid rise of the powerful criminal gangs that have flourished ever since on the profits of one illegal drug or another. Today, cocaine, heroin and other illegal drugs in the US continue to make huge profits for the gangs and fill the prisons with those caught using them.

Given the lessons we should have learned from the US during Prohibition years it seems all we have done is to follow its example with precisely the same results, though on a smaller scale.

Heroin in particular, has been demonised as part of this prohibition policy. We should remember that prior to the 1950s, it was a legally prescribed drug and doctors found it very useful for patients suffering great pain, or with a terminal illness..

On a personal note, my grandmother who died in 1951 at the age of 95, in her final hours became agitated and afraid. Her doctor gave her heroin (then a legal drug available on prescription). My aunt, who was present, told me that my grandmother relaxed into a smiling, quiet state from which she moved into death a few hours later.

Heroin has been illegal in this country for almost five decades and the only response to its inevitable, continuing, illegal use has been for our governments, state and federal, to follow the US and often making the penalties more severe. Usage has risen steadily during the past decade; criminals are making enormous profits and inevitably corrupting a percentage of our law enforcers.

But what else can we do? First, decriminalise drugs, currently labelled illegal and instead apply rules and limitations of course, as with alcohol and tobacco or any drug needing a prescription. Once criminality is no longer an issue, concerned citizens can set up informal groups on the

lines of AA to provide understanding, support and friendship to those who seek it. And if anyone imagines that decriminalising heroin will bring about a huge rise in addiction, they are way off-beam. The illegality is part of the attraction.

In brief it is time for a sea-change in our thinking on the matter of illegal drugs. Why not practice compassion instead of compulsion? It would seem to have more in common with the precepts of the founder of Christianity than the attitudes of some today who consider themselves Christians. Everything that we have tried to date is not only not working but making matters worse as the increase in deaths and misery continue. What have we to lose if, for once, we try a different approach?

Anne Edgeworth is a mother and grandmother and a teacher who has worked with young people most of her life.

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Drug-terror ads and kids don't mix

Pubdate: Mon, 15 Apr 2002

Source: AlterNet (US Web)

Copyright: 2002 Independent Media Institute

Several weeks ago, my children and I watched a family movie on the ABC Family Channel, and together we were exposed to the entertaining and fascinating world of drugs, drug money and violence.

Somewhere in the middle of the movie, part of a week long comedy series, the station ran an advertisement sponsored by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP). The advertisement offers stark pictures of teenagers talking about how they are really murderers, torturers and terrorists. The ad originally ran during the Super Bowl, costing taxpayers 3.5 million dollars, as part of a publicity campaign linking American youth who have tried illegal drugs with funding for terrorism.

In the version we saw, teenagers loom out at the viewer, saying such things as "I helped murder families in Columbia," "I helped kids learn how to kill," and "I helped blow up buildings." The teenagers justify their atrocities by noting that they were "just having fun."

The ONDCP Web site and President Bush claim that these ads provide an outlet for young people's idealism, enabling them to feel that they can contribute to the war against terrorism by giving up illegal drugs.

But for my children -- who witnessed the 9/11 attacks from their Manhattan public school windows -- any intended message about drugs and terrorism was lost. The ad not only failed to convey any coherent message regarding drugs, but it instead seemed to frighten them, making it appear that the threat of terrorism -- so close to their actual home -- comes somehow from American teenagers.

The ad frightened me as well, making me wonder why ABC would run such deceptive and scary material on a children's channel. I was so upset that I nearly turned off the television. Children, however, generally don't take kindly to having a television show turned off in the middle, so to avoid a form of domestic terrorism, we continued watching the movie.

During the next commercial break, there was another ad about drugs, but this one, in contrast to the earlier ad, celebrated them. In this ad, a pharmaceutical company was pushing the drug Zoloft, which will allegedly fix depres-

sion and post-traumatic stress disorder. The ad's cartoon figure -- appealing and accessible to children -- suggested that viewers should know what is happening to their own bodies, and should have a say in how to treat their emotional health problems.

The contradiction between the two ads was palpable -- sometimes using drugs contributes to terrorism, but sometimes using drugs contributes to mental health.

There is also a more subtle disparity between the two ads. In the ONDCP spot, one of the teenage actors says, "My life, my body." This phrase -- a rallying cry for numerous social and political movements seeking to ensure personal liberty and bodily integrity -- is said with sarcasm, meant to belittle the notion not only as selfish, but tantamount to traitorous. Yet, a few minutes later, the very same concept of personal autonomy and control fuels the advertising campaign for a mind-altering drug that will bring riches to an American pharmaceutical company.

The Zolofit ad also teaches that depression and post traumatic stress disorders are treatable and that people should not have to suffer from them needlessly. Yet, we know that some illegal drug use is related to self-medication for depression and post traumatic stress disorder. The two ads thus send contradictory messages here, as well, with one suggesting that self-medicating for these problems is a form of terrorism and the other arguing that it is simply a matter of informed consumerism.

As if these two drug ads were not enough, just a few commercial breaks later there was yet another one. In the third ad, a man comes home to find his kitchen utterly destroyed. After initial surprise, he starts to panic -- has his family been attacked by some intruder?

He rushes into the living room to see if his loved ones are safe. And there, sitting serenely on the couch, is his wife, happily sipping her General Foods International coffee and explaining, in not quite so many words, that her desperate need for a caffeine stimulant fix caused her to tear apart the kitchen to find the stuff. This ad startled my children, too -- but only because it prompted me to start shrieking things like, "Oh my god! Now they are saying drug use and property destruction are good things!"

Although we had planned to watch the other scheduled comedies on the ABC Family channel that week, we decided to rent movies and read aloud instead. I would rather not have my children watch TV ads that promote and laud some drug users while different ads -- funded by our government, no less -- spread misinformation and teach intolerance and prejudice against other drug users.

I do, of course, talk to my children about the many risks associated with all forms of drug use and abuse. But I also talk to them about responsibility and the hypocrisy apparent when our government will spend millions to portray innocent young people as terrorists, but steadfastly refuses to fund needed drug treatment for the millions of men women and children who need it in America today.

Lynn M. Paltrow is the executive director of the National Advocates for Pregnant Women.

Drug policy missteps

Pubdate: Thu, 11 Apr 2002

Source: Harvard Crimson (MA Edu)

Copyright: 2002, The Harvard Crimson, Inc.

Yale's Rebuke Of Unjust Federal Aid Restrictions Reflects Failures Of The Ill-Conceived Legislation.

This past week, Yale University announced that it would reimburse any student stripped of federal financial aid following conviction for drug possession. The "Drug Free Student Aid" provision of the Higher Education Act, passed in 1998, prohibits federal assistance to students convicted of any drug-related offense in an effort to deter drug use among teenagers and young adults.

Yale's decision will effectively nullify the law for Elis by replacing lost federal aid with an equivalent amount of university money.

Yale's new policy rejects the federal government's contention that inhibiting individuals' access to education somehow constitutes just punishment for drug-related offenses.

Rapists, murderers and other violent criminals, upon their acceptance to any university, still receive full consideration for federal financial aid, yet teenagers guilty of possessing a dime bag of marijuana are not. In its effort to wage war on drugs, the government has lost its sense of perspective on the relative severity of crimes and seems determined to single out drug offenders for permanent punishment. While thieves may spend time incarcerated, they are free to build a new and better life once released. Drug offenders, on the other hand, may be prevented from attending college and from achieving a higher level of education, stunting their socio-economic mobility and prospects for a better future.

Legislation sponsored by Rep. Barney Frank '61-'62 (D-Mass.), which would repeal this provision, is currently under consideration in the House of Representatives.

Beyond unfairly punishing drug offenders, the federal law's flaws also include a class bias. The majority of drug arrests in the United States occur in low-income areas, where police enforcement is at its highest.

Although drug use is prevalent among members of all socio-economic classes, law enforcement's focus on poorer areas creates a risk imbalance between communities of different economic character. The law, by targeting individuals convicted of drug offenses, is more likely to affect poor drug users than rich ones. Furthermore, even when wealthier students are convicted of drug offenses, the loss of financial aid is likely to present a lesser burden.

Therefore, the law not only unfairly targets low-income communities, but also punishes most severely individuals from those very communities.

Yale should be commended for its efforts to provide access to education for otherwise-qualified individuals convicted of minor drug offenses. Education is not an incentive to be dangled before teenagers in an effort to keep them from experimenting with drugs; though it may act as a small deterrent for some, the manifest injustice of the policy renders the means unacceptable in achieving the ends.

It is vital to the future of every individual that education be widely available to facilitate increased productivity, opportunity and living standards for everyone.

The federal government blundered in 1998 and Yale, to its credit, is working to set things right.

Harvard, as a finer institution than Yale, should lose no time in following suit.