

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 22 July, 2004

Meeting: 7:30pm

Speaker: **Affie Adagio** at 8pm

Venue: St Ninian's Uniting Church, cnr Mouat and Brigalow Streets, Lyneham

Topic: Diversity in approaches to dependencies

Addictive behaviours are the unavoidable part of being human. However, society needs to take responsibility for this situation and provide appropriate choices for recovery which involve the whole family. Society needs to be sensible about these choices and pressure government, professionals and the community into working together to make solutions work. The individual also needs to be empowered to choose what he or she believes will work.

Affie Adagio is AOD Interventions/Communication/Welfare TAFE Teacher, Family Therapist and President/Editor Humanist Society of NSW. She has just completed a 10 year PhD research program entitled Compulsions and Recovery Action Research at UWS Hawkesbury. This research covered conversations with people here in Australia and overseas in places such as Berne, Stockholme, Amsterdam and eleven cities in USA.

Refreshments will follow

Meeting dates:

FFDLR meets on the **fourth Thursday** of each month except December and January, unless otherwise advised.

Expected dates for meetings for 2004 are:

26th August, 23rd September, 28th October, 25th November.

Any enquiries please phone 6254 2961.

Editorial

In this field of drug law reform it seems that progress is hard to come by. The speed of reform rivals that of the downhill movement of glaciers. But, unlike that of glaciers the ultimate destination is not known.

More often than not we seem to be battling to simply hold the ground that had been gained in the past. Even the people whom we are trying to help seem to be putting obstacles in the way.

There has been an ongoing battle with the federal government and its agencies to continue with the policy of harm minimisation. Fortunately little attention has been focused on that issue for the moment.

Then here in the ACT, and directly following on from actions taken in South Australia, a bill has been introduced into the Legislative Assembly to reduce the number of cannabis plants that can be grown without criminal penalty. (Note that it is still against the law to grow the plants but police have discretionary powers to issue a civil fine, rather than impose a criminal charge.) In addition, the prohibition of growing of plants hydroponically is proposed

The purpose of the change is claimed to be to stop organised crime from getting a number of people to grow five plants each which would then be collected and sold on the black market.

The claim is not credible. Those who supply the black market cannabis will always find ways to supply their market. In all Australian states and territories growing cannabis for supply is illegal and yet it is still a flourishing black market trade. There is a conservatively estimated 28 tonnes of cannabis consumed in Australia each year. The large profit from and the demand for cannabis will always ensure that.

The matter first came up in the ACT when police raided houses that had been turned over to hydroponic production of cannabis. The images shown on TV indicate that far more than 5 plants were growing in those houses – so the change in number of plants will make little difference except to those who grow for their own purposes.

In those cases it will be easier for police to arrest these people and impose criminal charges – with all the negative consequences that flow from that. This would be an action contrary to the intention of the legislation, ie to protect individuals from the heavy handed excesses of the prohibition laws.

I have written to the Chief Minister on the issue. Members who are also concerned should also write to the Chief Minister. (*The Chief Minister, Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, GPO Box 1020, Canberra ACT 2601*)

A further matter that came to notice was a recent ABC TV 7:30 Report. It carried three stories from parents whose children died from methadone that was not prescribed for them. As a consequence the parents were calling for a ban on the use of take-away doses of methadone.

The deaths were tragic and the reaction from parents is understandable. However the knee-jerk reaction that take-away doses should not be allowed lacks objectivity, and is not a well thought through solution.

If the provision of take-away doses is ceased there will be serious outcomes for many who benefit from it. It exposes them as people who were addicted to heroin, and could potentially jeopardise their employment and social circumstances. It could force some back onto black market heroin and into crime. None of which is likely to help with their chronic and relapsing condition of heroin addiction nor will it improve safety for the community.

No system is perfect and the very effective methadone program is no different. It has been unfortunate that there have been some who diverted their methadone to the black market and equally unfortunate that others with little knowledge of the drug have used it with devastating results.

There is a great danger that those who decide policy in this area may be swayed by the emotion and abolish the program rather than taking the opportunity for a thorough evaluation with a view to improving it.

One would hope that wiser and more objective heads prevail.

Public forum: making it happen – impact of drug policy on the implementation of the Canberra Social Plan

Wednesday 23rd June, 2004, 5pm – 7pm.

A brief summary

This event built on the 2001 Drug Action Week forum at which a range of speakers from ACT agencies, which did not have drugs as their principal focus, discussed the extent that drugs impacted on their work. The agencies concerned were involved in education, child and family support, caring, community centres, suicide and

poverty. A transcript of that forum is at <http://www.ffdlr.org.au/PublicForums/Introduction.htm>.

The objective of the forum was to examine the means by which goals of the Canberra Social Plan can be achieved over its 10 to 15 years life having regard to the main social problems identified.

It was expected that the forum would:

- examine the plan's measures for achieving its goals
- examine adequacy of resources available
- identify integrated approaches necessary to tackle a range of risk factors, including substance abuse.

The speakers at this year's forum were: Professor Ian Webster, Physician, Emeritus Professor of Community Medicine and Public Health; Meredith Hunter, Executive Officer, Youth Coalition of the ACT; Associate-Professor, Dr Michael Levy, Director, NSW Corrections Health Service and Basil Varghese from the Brotherhood of St Laurence in Melbourne.

David McDonald, Social Research and Evaluation Consultant, was the chair.

It is expected that the full transcript of the speeches will be eventually available on our website www.ffdlr.org.au.

Dr Michael Levy made very strong points about prisons. He said they were institutions of social exclusion and used for deprivation of liberty. That was a contrast to the social plan which aims to include everyone. He also said that deprivation of liberty is the punishment of last resort. Prisons he said were not therapeutic environments - no matter what the rhetoric says.

From 1993 - 2003, prisoner population increased by 50% while Australia's population rose by only 15%. 80% of prisoners in NSW have used illicit drugs. 20% used while in prison. Hep C prevalence was 40% for males and 66% for females while in the population at large it was only 2%. [*This is a serious matter because prisoners return to the community with those infections and thus are a source of Hep C infection in the community. Ed*]. In respect of Hep C and other health matters he pointed out that health services in prison should be the same as those outside but they are definitely well behind the services available to the community.

Advice for implementation of the social plan in respect of the new ACT prison:

- Set targets for incarceration rates and keep to them

- Prisons have to link to human rights at every step
- Conceive the new prison as an institution of social inclusion (not exclusion).

Ian Webster commended the government for its consultation process in making the plan and for actually producing the plan. However he felt that the social plan was lacking in the area of alcohol and drugs. It needed another subset of hard edged issues to deal with this issue. That is the community must be prepared to examine the issues and be prepared to take hard decisions. We have to help or encourage professionals to have a different approach - that is to take an external view of the person and their environment not just the traditional internal medicinal approach.

Meredith Hunter spoke about a report just completed by the Youth Coalition of the ACT. There will be much to interest any who have concerns about youth. A strong point she made was that the youth were not consulted on many of the services that were supposedly established to help them. She also said that the solutions could often come from the people with the problems and it was vital that youth be consulted on youth based services.

One of the informants to the Youth Coalition report, a young person, suggested a path toward a better society would be to "get rid of the idea of bad things". Sometimes she said approaches in respect of alcohol and drug issues can marginalise the young.

She noted that the Canberra Social Plan was inspirational, and noted also that a key component, the Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy had not yet been released by the government. Unless that was done the social plan may only be inspirational. (ie have no practical impact).

Basil Varghese felt the social plan like all other social plans that he had read was a beautiful document but the problem was how to implement it. He talked about ghosts that we had to put to rest in respect of indigenous people, women, migrants, those in poverty. He also talked about poverty in its broadest sense.

He talked about the need for genuine connections between individuals - if we cannot share our vulnerabilities we cannot connect.

He said through the social plan we had a great opportunity to get things done. He gave the audience four important things that must be running simultaneously for the plan to happen:

- there must be power over information
- there must be power in decision making

- there must be power in relationships
- there must be power in the resources

Injection site a boost to war on drugs

The Province, (CN BC), Lindsey Arkley, Tue, 27 Apr 2004

MELBOURNE, Australia - Vancouver's supervised drug-injection site has been praised at an international conference on harm reduction as a major step in the war against drugs.

Mayor Larry Campbell said on the weekend that the site in the Downtown Eastside is likely to begin round-the-clock operations soon.

"Once we're operating at full capacity, then we'll have to consider opening other sites," he said at the 15th International Conference on the Reduction of Drug-Related Harm.

"I'm absolutely confident we're saving lives. We're looking at five to 10 interventions a week, and they include cases where we've actually called an ambulance and had people taken to hospital and treated."

The injection site on East Hastings Street is the only one in North America and has been open seven days a week, from 10 a.m. to 4 a.m., since it opened last September. Campbell said it should be open all the time.

Heather Hill of the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority, which operates the site, told the conference that 500 to 600 injections a day take place.

Of Vancouver's estimated 12,000 injecting drug users, about 4,600 are regarded as the "client population."

"We know we've had a huge penetration rate," she said. "About two-thirds of the client population have signed up."

Hill agreed that the site has probably prevented deaths from overdoses - and some users have been diverted into treatment programs by on-site counsellors.

"We've had a lot of positive feedback from parents and from the individual youths themselves around the fact that we've been able to hook them into different treatment resources," Hill said.

"I wouldn't go so far as saying we've made some people kick the habit. But we've provided some people some respite from the street, and opportunities to think about whether or not they want to move on with their lives."

Alex Wodak, president of the International Harm Reduction Association, said the injection site is important because of its potential to influence policy in the U.S.

"Around the world the tide is shifting, very clearly and very unmistakably, away from an approach to drug addiction based on criminal justice and law enforcement," said Wodak, director of the Alcohol and Drug Service at Sydney's St. Vincent's Hospital.

"Except in the U.S., the move is toward an approach based on health and social interventions, with support from law enforcement."

The zero-tolerance approach to drugs by the U.S. has been "a public-policy disaster," Wodak said, calling it a major contributor to high rates of incarceration and AIDS.

"The U.S. approach is also expensive. It breeds rampant police corruption, it's led to the development of narco-states in Afghanistan, Colombia and in Burma, and it's provided a healthy income stream for narco-terrorists.

"So, the more successful this alternative public health model is . . . the more a problem it is for the U.S. to continue being such a zealous supporter of its own failed model.

"It looks as though what Vancouver is doing is already having a positive impact in the city itself, and hopefully it can also have an impact in other parts of Canada, if not globally, especially in the U.S."

Retired police officer calls for drug policy reform

The Hannibal Courier-Post, Fri, 30 Jan 2004

Jack Cole To Speak To Rotary

After three decades of fueling the U.S. war on drugs with over half a trillion tax dollars and increasingly punitive policies, illicit drugs are easier to get, cheaper, and more potent than they ever were. The prison population has quadrupled and has made building prisons this nation's fastest growing industry, with 2 million incarcerated -

more per capita than any country in the world. Meanwhile people are dying in the streets and drug barons grow richer than ever before.

We must change these policies.

Current and former members of law enforcement recently created this new drug-policy reform group that believes the United States' drug policies have failed and that to save lives, lower the rate of addiction, and

conserve tax dollars, the United States must end drug prohibition.

LEAP (Law Enforcement Against Prohibition) believes a system of regulation and control is more effective than one of prohibition.

Jack Cole retired as a detective lieutenant after a 26-year career with the New Jersey State Police.



FFDLR information stall at Drug Action Week

For 14 of those years Cole worked as an undercover narcotics officer. His investigations spanned the spectrum of possible cases, from street drug users and mid-level drug dealers to international "billion-dollar" drug trafficking organizations. The overwhelming failure of these efforts propelled him to speak out and call for a set of genuine alternatives. Alternatives that would dramatically change

the landscape of American and world politics.

Cole holds a B.A. in criminal justice and a master's degree in public policy. Currently writing his dissertation for the Public Policy Ph.D. Program at the University of Massachusetts, his major focus is on the issues of race and gender bias, brutality and corruption in law enforcement. Cole believes ending drug prohibition will go a long way toward correcting those problems.

Cole is passionate in his belief that the drug war is steeped in racism, that it is needlessly destroying the lives of young people, and that it is corrupting police. Cole's discussions give his audience an alternative perspective of the U.S. war on drugs from the view of a veteran drug-warrior turned against the war.

Cole will be speaking to civic leaders, community organizations and the media to discuss America's greatest public policy disaster since Slavery.