

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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END OF YEAR BARBECUE AND AGM

Marion and Brian would be very pleased to have members come along to their home for an end of year Barbecue followed by the

Annual General Meeting Annual reports will be presented at the AGM followed by election of office bearers

When: Thursday 23 November

Time: Barbecue 6.00pm for 6.30pm. AGM at 8pm.

PLEASE LET MARION OR BRIAN KNOW IF YOUR ARE COMING.

If you would like to bring along a salad or something for sweets this would be appreciated. Marion and Brian will supply meat and drink.

RSVP: 62542961 or email mcconnell@ffdlr.org.au and we will give you our address.

Editorial

In the last month I was invited to speak to a group of high school students. I did not speak about the drugs themselves nor the effects of the drugs. I was asked to compare 'harm reduction policy' with 'tough on drugs policy'. I outlined the history that lead Australia to the current position where we have prohibition laws, and under that umbrella a national drug policy of Harm Minimisation and a current government policy of "Tough on Drugs/Zero Tolerance of Drugs".

As the class settled down the teacher tried unsuccessfully to get one student to sit next to her – presumably to provide some control over him. It promised to be a difficult talk.

But that was not the case. The students settled down very quickly and listened very closely. This was a subject that they had chosen. They had wanted to know about harm minimisation and how that compared to tough on drugs and zero tolerance.

The questions that followed showed a genuine thirst for knowledge on the subject. The questions that came thick and fast were intelligent and well thought out. They showed a depth of thinking and they collectively possessed a great deal of information on the subject.

One student asked how the needle and syringe program worked but others in the class knew the answer.

"Why cannot the drugs be stopped," one asked. The seizure rate of drugs of 5% to 20% under supply and demand control measures lead to questions about price. The magnitude of difference in the production price and

the street price of drugs created a brief pause in the questions.

The tougher laws that were recently introduced whereby a young person who purchased two ecstasy tablets, one for himself and a second to give to a friend was now defined as a serious criminal offender and if convicted could face 10 years jail, caused an even greater pause as they digested the information.

The question that left me without an answer was how is it that the government has two opposing policies – harm reduction and tough on drugs.

For me it was an enjoyable experience. One that gave some confidence that the world would be in better hands if those students eventually took over the reigns.

The contrast between the students and a woman we met a few days later was alarming. She had very little compassion for anyone who used drugs and took the view that all fault lay with the user and the family – they made the decision to do it and whatever happens to them was their own doing.

A thought crossed my mind that perhaps it is the case that for some people attitudes harden and compassion and understanding go out the window with increasing years. But then again I have met some wonderful older people who are compassionate and understanding.

In any event we must do all we can to ensure that the next generation do not develop into people like that woman. We must encourage their inquiring minds, we must avoid the propoganda that has had such an effect on that woman and provide factual, truthful information, and we must encourage the compassion and understanding in them. The inbuilt hypocrisy detector that young people have is also a wonderful gift. That gift should be nurtured so that they retain that also in their older years.

Cries of futility in dead ends of drug policy

By Neil Lade

Published in the Canberra Times 22 October 2006

Lost in an empty ring, going round in circles. Where words drift into nothing and there's no escape from deja vu. Just blinding stupor in a tunnel of darkness. And deep behind dark glasses no one can see my tears.

It's another time of year when futility struggles with reality. When I'm drawn somewhat reluctantly to Weston Park in Yarralumla - and wounds gape again. It's last Monday, and I'm back for the ACT Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform's 11th Annual Remembrance Ceremony for those who lose their life to illicit drugs.

It's surreal - tranquil, slightly disconnected. People of all ages, slightly drooped. Kids, and a detached dog, wandering in and out.

VIPs standing stiffly in dark blue suits. Blossom flecks from the locust tree floating like snow flakes in the breeze.

This is the seventh ceremony since my elder daughter Mel died from a heroin overdose in 1999. Her casual use was just a small part of who she was. It was a false solace when the black dog chased. She could light up a room, a stage, any space - and she could plunge them all into darkness. She tried so hard not to use, but it's not so simple - despite what fearless leaders and sanctimonious tough-on-drugs protagonists say. It's so easy to preach from ivory towers of intransigence, mired in narrow views. Just say no, and it all goes away. But it hasn't. It's been sidelined, but it thrives in hell.

Keynote speaker Tony Trimmingham illustrates this all too clearly. He's the founder and head of Family Drug Support, which, among other things, offers a seven-day, 24-hour-help phone line Australia-wide (1300 368 186). Tony's son Damien died of a heroin overdose in 1997, and he talks about the hole that's still there. That's when I start crying. I know that hole. He talks also about modern perceptions. He rang a Sydney newspaper recently and one of the big-wigs said, "But heroin's not an issue any more." But it is, of course. And drug abuse in general. The frightening death tolls of 900-plus in the late '90s have gone, but Tony says the death toll is still about 300 a year.

Suddenly I'm back to where I've been before. Over and over again. In head-banging, mind-numbingly obvious. That nothing has really changed. No one likes what addicts do - especially if you're a victim of attack, break-in or theft. But perhaps things would be better if they were in the health rather than the criminal system. Ruled by sanity rather than morality where the mindset of abstinence rules.

By the time I refocus, another speaker is in mid-stream. Australian Democrats leader Lyn Allison says that "a criminal justice approach to drug policy does not work".

So says all of me. But her words float in dead-end directions. And when Catholic Bishop Pat Power says, "Don't lose hope," I just say, "No." Though it does seem hopeless when he reads out 170 names of people who have died in their own wars against drugs. When he calls out "Melanie Van Den Heuvel, aged 22, 1999", all I can do is cry.

Incidence of heroin use in Zurich, Switzerland: a treatment case register analysis.

Nordt C, Stohler R. *The Lancet* 2006 367:1830-1834

Comments by Andrew Byrne
<http://www.redfernclinic.com/>

This definitive study succinctly refutes the last remaining criticism of harm reduction: whether it encourages drug use. It appears to do precisely the opposite, as these authors report.

Switzerland's 'cantons' have registers of drug treatment approvals going back to the 1970s. It is therefore possible to derive statistically valid measures of the rate of addiction of its citizens over the period when needle services, injecting rooms, methadone treatment, heroin prescription and most recently, buprenorphine treatment were being introduced. Such data reflect the natural history of opiate use through interactions with treatment services such as methadone maintenance treatment (MMT), withdrawal from such treatments, mortality and other demographics.

The canton of Zurich has 1.2 million people (a fifth of the Swiss population) over half being rural. Between 1991 and 2005 about 10,000 patients underwent 24,000 episodes of opiate prescribed treatment (2.4 per person). By 2005 there were 3000 still in treatment and 7000 who had been discharged.

Of those who left treatment in Zurich in 1991-1993, 33% never re-entered treatment, 66% rejoined treatment within 10 years, only 1% returning after a decade. The authors derived a long-term annual abstinence rate of 4%, comparing this with an Australian report of 5% along with others. [*The Lancet article notes that this higher percentage in Australia and other countries could be due to a higher death rate. Ed*] Each year, the mean age of those in current treatment increased by 9 months, reflecting fewer new entrants and high retention rates.

Importantly, about 50% of Swiss subjects entered methadone treatment within 2 years of starting to use heroin with only small differences depending on sex, age and injector status. This contrasted with an average of 4 years to enter treatment in Italy and probably longer in some other countries. The authors further estimate that at any one time, about 50% of those with problem opioid use are on MMT. With fewer new initiates in Switzerland, they project this figure will rise to 64% by 2010. These figures are comparable with reports from Amsterdam in the 1990s.

Perhaps most crucial are the findings regarding the numbers of Zurich canton citizens taking up heroin for the first time. From around 80 people in 1975, this increased progressively to ~850 new users annually by 1990, only to drop again to ~150 by 2002 at the height of the harm reduction interventions. These included prescription heroin to a small but consistent proportion of maintenance cases.

So we can now quote reliable knowledge that in a modern western country which advocates and practices harm reduction in its most progressive form (apart from decriminalized cannabis) there are not more, but fewer young people availing themselves of the opiate class of drugs. Indeed, we can now say with confidence that harm reduction measures do not "send a message" encouraging drug use. The authors believe that by 'medicalizing' addiction, an impression is created that it is unpleasant and undesirable, to be avoided, which is just what has happened.

FFDLR views on Australia's mutual assistance arrangements

FFDLR's submission to the Australian Government Attorney General's Office on the review of Australia's mutual assistance policy found serious deficiencies in the arrangements and recommended:

The Mutual Assistance Act needed to be amended to broaden the scope of assistance to which the safeguards of the Act apply. In particular, Australia should not provide assistance where a person may be convicted for an offence carrying the death penalty unless the requesting State gives an undertaking that the death penalty will not be imposed or if imposed will not be carried out:

1. In civil law countries where evidence is being gathered or may be provided that could result in the death penalty.
2. Where assistance may be provided on an officer level or any other level, irrespective of whether a request is or is not made.

A full copy of the submission can be found on our website: ffdlr.org.au.

Focus must be parenting, not framework to micro-manage

Bill Bush

Published in the Canberra Times on Wednesday 27 September 2006, p. 13

The deaths of three more babies from families known to child protection authorities (CT, 22 Sept. p. 1) rightly dismays us all. A firestorm of fury is an understandable response but it is essential that we take stock of the facts.

The focus of political and official comments is on process and resources and not on the part played by underlying policies that contribute to the problem. Thus, media comments of Minister Katy Gallagher and her Opposition critic, Jacqui Burke, mention improvement of assessment skills, better placement systems, more resources, streamlined protection procedures etc. In that, they repeat the approach of a string of investigations including the Vardon and Murray reports.

The Australia-wide crisis in child protection has brought the system across the country to its knees. It is getting worse rather than better in spite.

The existing focus on process and resources is an unsustainable drain on budgets. In the ACT, operational expenditure has increased by an average of around 19 per cent a year. According to an ACT departmental report, "the cost of providing 24-hour supervision seven days a week for children at high risk for extended periods or providing specialist services for young people with multiple needs can exceed \$500 000 a year per child or young person."

The current approach is unsustainable because it seeks to micro-manage the lives of other human beings. If parents are not fulfilling their responsibility towards their children there is no way that the state can hope to provide a substitute on anything like the scale and quality needed.

Parents have obligations but so do governments. They should not obstruct parents doing what they should do. In particular, governments have an obligation to ensure that the environment for parents to raise their family is not undermined by their laws and policies.

As should be blindingly obvious from the circumstance of the latest three dead babies and the experience of child protection across the country, drug laws and policies are among the key determinants of the environment in which parents bring up children.

Parents who are drug addicted often find themselves crushed between their obligation to be good parents (which they overwhelmingly want to be) and drug laws and policies that insist that they overcome their addiction. That is wrong. Being a good parent should be the overriding objective. Whether someone is doing what she should as a parent is far more important than whether she has a "dirty" urine.

The priority of government should be to provide an environment in which anyone with a health problem (including addiction) can have access to necessary treatment, not punish them as a criminal because of that problem. That addiction itself is not the issue is demonstrated by the many, many exemplary parents leading stabilised lives on methadone maintenance programs.

The death of these three babies will not be in vain if it jolts us all to turn our attention from the continuing preoccupation with process and resources to the laws and policies that shape the environment in which the shame of child abuse and neglect flourishes.

The author is a member of Families and Friends for Drug Law Reform

President's Annual Report 2006

(to be presented at the November AGM)

Introduction

This eleventh President's report covers the 12 month period from November 2005 to November 2006.

I would like to thank all those who contributed during the year to the group's activities by writing letters, writing submissions, visiting MPs and others, participating in media events, addressing groups and meetings, assisting with various organised activities, participating and providing support and attending meetings. I would like especially to thank my office bearers John Ley, vice president; Pat Varga, treasurer; and Cynthia Groundwater, secretary. I also thank Marion McConnell for her organising work and support, and St Ninian's Church for the use of its hall. Again some excellent work has been undertaken for FFDLR by Bill Bush and I thank him for his tireless efforts.

Events of significance

Internationally there have been some positive signs of change.

Canada, on the doorstep of the USA, has opened a medically supervised injecting centre. Great Britain, in one small area adopted a needle and syringe program in a remand centre. Also in Britain recently it was reported that a group of six drug-addicted inmates and former prisoners have been awarded out-of-court payments from the government for what they say was "cold turkey" treatment in jail - a breach of their human rights.

In our region it has been less favourable: in Singapore a young Australian man was executed and in Indonesia six young men now have been sentenced to death. A number of others are serving long prison sentences. It has to be noted that representations made by the Australian government against the imposition of the death penalty has been ineffective.

In Australia: There has been a government advertising campaign of the zero tolerance nature focused on cannabis even though use of cannabis has been declining for a number of years. The federal government has been praising itself by wrongly claiming to have caused the heroin shortage in 2000 but has ignored the signs and the warnings that they had received as far back as 1996 that methamphetamine use was on the increase. Until recently the government appears not to have noticed that the use of methamphetamine, and stronger variations such as base and ice have become more fashionable.

The SA health minister has expressed a view that to talk about and debate drugs and drug policy is to encourage drug use. If it cannot be discussed and debated there can be no change for the better.

The Kings Cross Medically Supervised Injecting Place trial, which was extended for a further 4 years in 2003, is still functioning well. It has received the support of many in the community, the police, church, medical and health authorities. Unfortunately the current opposition leader has vowed to close the centre if his party should be elected.

In the ACT the government is proceeding with the construction of its first prison – the Alexander Maconochie Centre. Many claims have been made that the new prison will be a model to look up to. However, indications of that happening at this stage are not promising.

Involvement in the community or other organisations

FFDLR is represented as follows:

The Opiate Program – ACT: John Ley.

Crime Prevention Committee: Bill Bush.

ACTCOSS Corrections Coalition: Bill Bush, Brian McConnell

ACT Alcohol and Other Drugs Strategy Implementation & Evaluation Committee: Brian McConnell continued his representation on this group.

DIRECTIONS: Brian McConnell is a member of the Board of this drug user support and education service agency.

ADCA Reference Group: John Ley is represented on the Prevention and Community Education Reference Group.

Representations

FFDLR members met with and made representations to the following:

- Brian McConnell, John Ley and Marion McConnell met with the new ACT Chief Police Officer for an exchange of views.
- Meeting with ACT Health Minister 1 February 2006
- Bill Bush and Brian McConnell met with the ACT Chief Minister's chief of staff and discussed a press release issued by the Prime Minister about a proposal relating to cannabis and mental health that was to be raised at a COAG meeting.
- Brian McConnell took up in correspondence with Senator Ellison the issue of police co-operation with Indonesia and the Bali Nine.
- Brian & Marion McConnell, John Ley and Joan Westaway met with Karen Lenihan the C.E.O of the ACT Alcohol and Drug Programme to discuss changes that were being implemented in that service.
- Marion McConnell & Bill Bush met with Bishop Pat Power to seek assistance in inviting Father Peter Norden, a Jesuit Priest from Melbourne, to be a Speaker at our Drug Action Week forum.
- Marion McConnell & Bill Bush met Senator Lyn Allison in October 06 to discuss the remembrance ceremony and Commonwealth drug issues and with Bishop Pat Power concerning the remembrance ceremony.
- Bill Bush, and Brian and Marion McConnell met with ACT Health Minister, Katie Gallagher to discuss health policies and services in the ACT prison.

Submissions

FFDLR made the following submissions during the year:

- Submission to the Project Management Group on the National Cannabis Strategy.
- Submission and oral presentation to the Inquiry to the Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission into Amphetamines and other Synthetic Drugs.
- Submission and oral presentation to the Joint Parliamentary Committee of the Australian Crime Commission. A Supplementary Submission was provided following the oral presentation.

- Submission to the Australian Government Attorney Generals Office about the review of Australia's mutual assistance

Conferences, Seminars and Inquiries Attended

- Bill Bush attended workshop at University House on restorative justice and young people in November 2005
- Several members attended the meeting of the Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law reform. The speakers included, Mal Washer Zero-tolerance: a Practitioner's Perspective, Brian McConnell (Introduction), Dr Andrew Byrne (Medical Aspects of Drug Law Reform), Rev'd Harry Herbert (Medically Supervised Injecting Centre), David McDonald (At the frontiers of Harm Reduction - Prisoners' Rights to Health and Safety).
- Brian and Marion McConnell attended a seminar on Grandparents parenting grandchildren because of drugs.
- Brian & Marion attended the Drug Policy Modelling Project in Sydney. The Project looks at the bases for developing Drug Policies using research and evidence and how to get best value for money for use in Drug Policy. The Colonial Foundation funds the project. Alison Ritter will be asked to speak at a future meeting.
- Bill Bush attended the ACTCOSS Conference: This conference is held every two years. A dominant issue at the conference was housing particularly the increasing number of people with mental illness attempting to access public housing and the reduced funding.
- Family Drug Support 'Mulgoa' Weekend: Bill Bush and Cynthia Groundwater attended. Guest Presenters informed attendees about some mental health issues and gave up to date information on methamphetamines, including 'ice'.
- ACTCOSS Prison Forum Bill, Marion, Brian and John attended the forum. It was run mainly for service-providing organizations, most of whom expressed pessimism about the prospects of the prison succeeding in its objectives.

Published opinion pieces

- Prison of political correctness still distorting drug use by Bill Bush in the Canberra Times on 9 November 2005
- Cracking down on cannabis: mental health: new battlefield - abstinence or harm minimisation? by Bill Bush in The Age on 13 Feb. 2006
- Kids at risk: why we are failing by Bill Bush in the Canberra Times in Sept. 2006

FFDLR Awareness raising activities

- Nov 05: Bill bush spoke at a forum at the ACT Assembly organised by CAHMA on "How to talk about a prion NSP in polite society and not be shunned".
- March: Andrew Macintosh, Deputy Director Australia institute spoke at a public meeting at the ACT Legislative Assembly about Methamphetamines, Mental Health and Drug Law Reform. The meeting was sponsored by Mary Porter, MLA and was well attended.
- May: Bill Bush spoke to a meeting of the Independent Scholars Association on "Scholarship in a stormy sea: survival in the passion and politics of drug policy
- May: Brian McConnell spoke at the Wesley uniting Church – Can drug law reform make things better?
- June: Drug Action Week: Father Peter Norden spoke at a public meeting at the ACT Legislative Assembly about Prisons, Drugs and Mental Illness: must they always go together? The meeting was sponsored by Mary Porter and about 100 people attended.
- November 2006: Presentation on harm reduction versus tough on drugs at an ACT high school.

Talks at FFDLR meetings

- April: Bill Bush spoke to our meeting about the new A.C.T. Prison, about the most recent meeting of the ACT Crime Prevention Committee at which John Paget, Head of the Prisons Project, gave a presentation.
- May: Victor Martin, Deputy Public Advocate, spoke about 'Advocating for people with impaired decision making ability – do drugs play a part?'
- July: Bruce & Prashant Munro reported on the International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm held in April and about the contact he had made with a Canadian activist group "From Grief to Action".
- August: Kevin Wenman, from the Insurance Policy Section of the A.C.T. Department of Treasury.

Remembrance Ceremony

The Eleventh Annual Remembrance Ceremony was held at Weston Park in the ACT on 16 October 2006. Speakers were Tony Trimmingham from Family Drug Support, Senator Lyn Allison and Bishop Pat Power. The Canberra Union Voices added significantly to the ceremony. Geoff Bagnall photographed the event. See our website for more information.

FFDLR also participated in discussion into the possibility of establishing a national remembrance day.

FFDLR media activities

The Writing Letters to the Editor brochure was revised and distributed with the February newsletter.

A number of letters to the editor were written by members and published.

Media releases were issued as follows:

- Young and mentally ill endangered by Howard's cannabis scare issued in Feb. 2006
- Drug Policy: A plea to put health and well being first.