

John Murray - ACT Chief Police Officer

Kerrie Tucker: Our next speaker is John Murray. John Murray as I am sure you are aware is the ACT Chief Police Officer and has a daily experience of the issues as well. Please welcome him. (applause)

Thank you Kerry, Gary Humphries, Leader of the Opposition, Commissioner Mick Keelty, other distinguished guests, my fellow panelists.

I would like to offer a police perspective on this ongoing debate, and I suppose ongoing infinitely. At least in the first instance I think we should reflect on where we have come from because we could be accused sometimes of not coming very far at all but we only have to go back to the 70s to realise that the approach to drugs was essentially one of a punitive nature. All laws were geared towards describing everything as an offence, the persons who committed these offences obviously as offenders, seldom was the word victim used, very few occasions was the health aspect of drug use ever mentioned and certainly education didn't feature in the forefront of how we tackle these problems. So consequently it wasn't just police in the 70s who tackled this issue as a purely punitive or legalistic one but everybody else did. And at the same time there were some well informed studies which directed people's attention (including politicians) to other avenues of alternatives to this purely legalistic approach, apparently ignored, and it's now that we come to this decade that we are actually adopting some of these alternatives which were suggested some decades ago. So what I would like to do in this short presentation is to draw attention to four or five points

The first is the significant societal shift and also at the same time the police shift towards drug usage and drug abuse. The second is the drug strategy adopted by the Australian Federal Police and the ACT Police and how they matched that, but also I would like to present to you a street level operational police perspective of how drugs are seen by them. I would also like to draw attention to what might be called the by-products of drug usage and talk about how it affects other victims like the victims of robbery, burglary and assault, then draw attention to the limitations of the current process if you tackle it purely in terms of a punitive or a legalistic one. Finally I would like to offer a suggestion which I think is a collective view of all of us here and how we might do that.

Reflecting briefly on the past there was a time when overdoses or ODs as we call them were essentially a police matter. Police were called to these events and looked at the event itself by virtue of what offences had been committed and what prosecution should follow and it was intuitively and legalistically supported by all others. As a consequence of this of course people who were taking drugs and suffering from overdose and the people present when this happened were reluctant, even frightened to call police. The consequence of that of course was deaths and serious injury. The changed process as a result of the National Drug Strategy was the objective of Harm Minimisation Strategy. The law enforcement shift towards saving life was in the 80s and 90s and police then effectively shifted the whole philosophy of attending drug situations where someone was actually the victim of a health or other problem. And from that time on police were only attend to instances of drug overdose when they are called there by someone else and even if they did attend and someone

hasn't died of a result they quickly leave recognising as I have said before the implications of propensity for people not to report such instances.

Now the drug strategy which has been put in place is consistent with the ACT Drug Strategy - From Harm to Hope and the principles of course are a coordinated action by drawing together various initiatives in the areas of health, education, law enforcement, community safety and the environment but also in terms of principles emphasises the partnerships between government agencies and non-government agencies and the community in addressing the complex issues surrounding alcohol and other drug use. And the third principle is minimising the harm to the individual and society associated with the use and misuse of alcohol and other drugs. The ACT Policing Drug Strategy is based on the conceptions of harm minimisation as David has alluded to in his presentation and I will talk to some other issues later about what might be regarded as controversial points raised by David.

The strategies are of course the collaboration, co-operation and consultation if I may use the three Cs there to the key stakeholders in the Territory. We also have to involve the training and skills development of our people in the AFP. That doesn't just involve competency development but it also involves a level of introduction of an education of the broader aspects of drug use and drug abuse and I will go onto to explain why that is very important to talk about police culture in a very short time.

We have in terms of strategy interventions to prevent and reduce drug related harm through developing and delivering drug education to children and other young people and groups identified at being high risk. And I see Gary Humphries there and I mention that with his support in the last budget when he was in Government and now supported by the current government quite a lot of money 1.2 million dollars I seem to recall was put forward in terms of crime prevention recognizing that the inefficiencies or the limitations if you like of pure detection. We also promote through our strategy information and education programs with a shifting emphasis in policing strategies which give rise to a less conventional approach or a less traditional approach to policing.

I will skip over a few of the other strategies because they tend to have been mentioned by previous speakers but I can have them available for anybody else who wants to talk about that or ask questions about it. Can I move then to what seems central in terms of my perspective and what I can offer is to identify an aspect of life you may not know much about and that's police culture. There is a strong link between police and victims of crime. The most people police see are not offenders. That might even shock you but it is a hard fact often not realised by police themselves. The most people the police see are victims of crime, people who have had their houses broken into, their cars stolen or have been assaulted for example. And why that is important is for two reasons. The contact of police with victims of crime is constant. There is a daily ongoing face to face situation which police encounter. The second and most important part of that in terms of the police culture that develops from this is they often see people in a state of anxiety, grief and sometimes severe suffering that can last for a long time, so it is quite natural that police tend to develop an empathy towards victims of crime.

Now researchers have said that as a consequence it is quite natural for police, whether you like it or not that police with this strong empathy for victims of crime get a great deal of satisfaction of pursuing then appending and prosecuting an offender. There is nothing more natural police researchers say about that. In terms of people who take drugs and to support their habit commit these crimes I have just referred to, is not always recognised by people in policing at the front end. It is not always empathized by people who have seen the victim of crime, had their house broken into, their car stolen or been assaulted, to feel that same level of empathy or understanding or even sensitivity towards the person who is using drugs and stealing to support their habit. That by the way shouldn't make us as police managers stop their and say well "So what?" What it does encourage us to do is to take on the challenge and in the strategy I mentioned before not just encourage but train and develop and educate policing into a broader understanding about the complexities of drug use and the socio-economic and other health issues which give rise to young and other people taking drugs and acting in a way which is actually beyond their individual control

An example of this and I am pleased to see that Detective Sergeant David Sharp is here today: an example of this better informed or more sophisticated or even more sensitive approach to policing is through Operation SKEET. Operation SKEET is based on the fact that we know in Canberra and other cities in this country, young and other people are having their drinks spiked and as a consequence suffer from other crimes including rape abduction, confinement and assault. Under a traditional model, police might say well that it is not a big issue because it is not reported very much and that is an entire cop out. A more sophisticated and well developed police strategy would say we know it is under-reported but we know it happens so what we are doing is trying to uncover the true level of crime in this area. Now that's essentially new in terms of policing without being disrespectful to previous policing initiatives. But what it also does and this is what David and his people are doing is to say rather than pursue the offenders rigorously to the exclusion of any other tactics, we do that anyway, let's try and uncover what the problems are and in turn let's try and educate the people in this Territory, as to what the propensities of these people are and the consequences of them not acting properly or safely within a drinking establishment. I am pleased to say, and this might sound arrogant, but the rest of the country has followed the model we have set here. It was started off as purely educational campaign with people who have licences and licenced premises. We had them together. We have also met young and other people to talk about the propensity for drink spiking and the consequences. We know as a matter of fact that young men and women are disinclined to come forward and tell us what has happened to them for the reasons of embarrassment. We know that it is largely under reported but we regard it as a very serious offence and that is why through education and detection, by the way, we intend to pursue that. I say that in the light of the general philosophy we have put forward about policing drugs to say that we are adopting in terms of a strategy a much broader and better educated and more informed way of dealing with things and realise the limitations of pure detection.

A point though that should be made, and I go back to Operation Anchorage started which was geared at a concern of people here in Canberra, saying we are sick and tired of our cars being stolen we are absolutely dreadfully annoyed about houses being broken into and our property stolen. We set about in February last year in an operation geared toward recidivist offenders initially on the assumption as we tend do

to sometimes in this city to say that there must be someone from Sydney who is committing these offences. But it wasn't the case. In three or four months later when we had arrested 233 people we found that almost all of them came from Canberra but we also found this that in 82% of the cases there was a form of drug addiction most likely heroin. The other common factor about that operation was that the people who were inclined to commit one offence were inclined to commit more. One individual committed 42 offences during that period. Now you do not have to be Einstein to work out that there was a problem, especially heavy addiction to heroin. Effectively when we took these people off the streets the drop in crime was quite dramatic. We reduced crime effectively for the year in terms of break and enter by 24% and reduced car theft by 27% which is unprecedented in jurisdictions across the countries.

What police see though is that there was 1850 victims of house breaking during that time and again I go back to the empathy police feel. What we haven't lost sight of is the fact that we have to address the challenge that lies in terms of how we address the problems. I mention again Gary, and I am sorry to mention again but I went to see your Cabinet you might recall and I said we can't keep doing this when these people come back on the streets we will lock them up again and I anticipated the question of 'well what do we do about that?' The suggestion was we should tackle the problem at the root causes which meant early intervention; it meant not just a police problem. No one has the franchise of how to fix this problem, no one has the franchise on saying this is my problem alone and this is how we can fix it. What we realise and with the support of that government and this current government is that we have to tackle this in a multi jurisdictional way and it is not always police that should intervene on the first instance and in fact of this and many instances it is another agency that should start.

The point I would like to make is the difficulty or the limitations of seeing something from your own perspective. A young child who has a mother who is an addict and a prostitute, maybe undernourished the health and welfare look at that. The same child goes to school and because it is undernourished and lack of parental care doesn't do well at school the educational says he or she is a poor performer. That same child in that state of lack of support and comfort if you like might break a window on the way home from school and the police say it is a legal problem. What we haven't been doing until then, is to recognise that there are many people interested in that same child and that same mother and the need for agencies to get together.

So we have in terms of strategy put together many programs which are before the event. Operation SKEET I have talked about is essentially an education program about preventing that crime. We have programs like 'Making the Difference' which is going to schools and talking to young people about how they might, divert themselves away from being victims of crime or of being actual offenders. We have 'Simple Cannabis Offence Notices' which recognise that some simple offences shouldn't be punished by court. We also have the common law caution and we also have a diversionary program for simple drug and other offences to take them away from the judicial process.

So as I move towards the conclusion can I draw it together and say this, that I believe that despite the despair and anxiety that is still expressed justifiably in my view about where we are going with drugs, we have come in a short time quite a long way. If we

just talk about police perspective and police attitude and police strategies we have moved from a purely punitive one to one which recognises the broader implications to people and treating it as other people have as a health and society issue not always deserving of prosecution. We also firmly embrace the idea of harm minimisation which is supply reduction, demand reduction and harm minimisation. David talked about the conflict between two ministers and unfortunately that is seemingly customary in this so called enlightened society where one party has to essentially speak against the other. But I regard it more of a dilemma than a conflict. The dilemma from a policing point of view is yes we have to pursue victims concerns about property that has been stolen. The dilemma is how much and to the extent to which police are willing and able to give consideration to diversionary issues like taking the offenders away from prosecution and at the same time satisfying the victims of crime who justifiably say I want my just desserts. That seems to me to come out of a broad education process. And in terms of supply reduction, a fair comment about the chart that was thrown on the map by David but one of the aspects about reducing the amount of drugs coming into the country which has been very successful is almost immeasurable about what you have stopped and if the graph does plunge to the bottom it might mean that there are less drugs coming in and that seems to be indicative of what we have found here in this territory when the so called heroin drought seemed to coincide with operation anchorage and also a coincidental factor was the reduction of deaths through overdose. There was a dramatic drop at the same time. So in terms of how we do that it is not always in terms of supply reduction pursuing it with a prosecution we have adopted in terms of supply reduction another tactic which again in former times was never used and that is disruption. Actually disrupting the supply inwards. So in that short presentation I hope I have given some insight to what police see as the drug issue and hopefully I have convinced you as it were that it is not a single approach it is a more comprehensive approach and I hope in terms of serving the community there is a more community responsive approach. (Applause)

Kerrie Tucker; Thank you very much