

Committee Secretary
Victorian Parliament Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee
Inquiry into Drug Law Reform

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Re: Victorian Parliament Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee Inquiry into Drug Law Reform

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Victorian Parliament Law Reform, Road and Community Safety Committee Inquiry into Drug Law Reform.

This is a joint submission from Harm Reduction Australia (HRA) and Family Drug Support (FDS).

It is important to establish that no matter how strong our desire for people not to use drugs or our efforts at education and prevention, people will use drugs. Yet for far too many people that will mean encountering many unnecessary harms.

First and foremost, families want people they know using drugs to be safe.

Families living with someone who uses drugs often find the situation very confronting, stressful and difficult. The constant concerns about the impacts on their behaviour, health, mental well-being, employment, study, relationships, children, finances and future prospects take their toll. Yet we know that much like the drug called alcohol, the millions of people that are using illicit drugs in this country don't all have problems from their drug use. However, the added worry that because their family member is using a substance that is illegal it means they could be arrested, charged and criminalised is an unnecessary and cruel additional burden. It is not only the person using drugs who is being punished – it is the whole family who suffer.

Criminal convictions for drug use can leave ongoing and permanent stains on people's lives. They can put an end to career prospects and severely restrict overseas travel. Imagine the chaos that would ensue if we actually arrested and charged every person that ever used an illegal drug. In the end it is the young and the poor that disproportionately bear this burden.

In tackling the problems of drugs we should emphasise the health, well-being and human rights of the person using drugs and focus on supporting their families, not use it as an opportunity to punish.

In relation to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference we believe there are a number of opportunities for reform of the law, policy and practice to help save lives and protect individuals, families and communities from drug related harms.

Australia was a world leader in its development and implementation of effective harm reduction programs as part of its efforts to reduce the transmission of HIV in the early years of the pandemic. The results were recognised internationally as a model of balanced pragmatism and innovation. Australia saw the introduction of a sophisticated network of needle and syringe programs, increased support and engagement with affected communities (including consumers of drugs), as well as a rapid expansion of opiate substitution programs and drug treatment services. Unfortunately, since this period of evidence based policy development and implementation, the approach of successive Australian Governments has seen an over investment and reliance on law enforcement to address drug use.

The rapidly changing nature of drug production, availability, distribution and use requires an agile and evidence focussed response.

Accordingly, based on the growing body of evidence available and the clear desire of many families, we call on the following policies and programs to be introduced as a matter of urgency.

- Decriminalisation of personal drug use, along with possession for personal use, to address the significant long term health, financial and social harm that is caused by arresting and convicting (and incarcerating in some cases) people who use drugs, including methamphetamines;
- Significantly increase the level of funding for drug harm reduction and demand reduction services, particularly given the substantial imbalance to the level of funding provided to law enforcement for supply reduction activities;
- The need for a much greater level of engagement and consultation with people who use drugs in the development of policy and program responses;
- The need for more supervised injecting facilities;
- The need for pill testing to be available at music festivals and venues, including the immediate cessation on the use of sniffer dogs at these events and venues;
- The need for heroin prescription programs to attract currently non-engaged heroin users into the treatment network;
- Greater support for families that is ongoing and focused on their needs;

As you will see from the number of attachments to this submission, the development and implementation of effective and evidence based policy is a core principle for HRA and FDS.

In addition to the information provided it is important to note that in regard to the 2nd Term of Reference that there are numerous reports available on international best practices. Countries such as Portugal, Switzerland, Canada and others, can provide a wealth of detail and evidence for policies and practices that are both effective and efficient in their results to reduce drug related harm.

As a final note, we reiterate that saving lives of should be paramount. Policies and practices to reduce harm, treat drug use and support people and families in our communities are meaningless when the person has died as a result of policies that increase harm.

Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require any further information.

Yours sincerely

Gino Vumbaca
President
Harm Reduction Australia



Tony Trimingham
Founder & CEO
Family Drug Support



HRA & FDS Attachments for Further Information

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/tony-trimmingham/your-kids-on-ice-what-to-do-next/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/tony-trimmingham/we-need-to-say-know-to-drugs/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/tony-trimmingham/harm-reduction-the-key-to-drugs-policy/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/tony-trimmingham/safe-injection-rooms-would-save-lives/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/tony-trimmingham/we-cant-breed-out-drug-addicts/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/gino-vumbaca/we-should-just-say-no-to-australias-approach-to-drugs/>

<http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/gino-vumbaca/its-time-to-face-the-music-on-australias-flawed-drug-policy/>

<http://www.harmreductionaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/HRA-Ice-Strategy-Statement.pdf>

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/the-war-on-drugs-is-a-war-against-our-own-children-friends-and-families-20151125-gl7kkl.html>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/gino-vumbaca/the-war-on-drugs-has-become-an-embarrassment-of-orwellian-proportions_b_9233694.html

http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/gino-vumbaca/health-warnings-on-drugs-shouldnt-be-provided-by-police/?utm_hp_ref=au-homepage

<http://www.harmreductionaustralia.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/HRA-Statement-of-Drug-Policy-Hysteria.pdf>