

Harm Reduction Australia's Statement on the National Ice Action Strategy

Harm Reduction Australia has welcomed the Federal Government's first step to shift from a law enforcement focus to a health based approach to addressing drug issues in Australia.

There is little doubt that the Government recognises the evidence and value of treating drug use as a health issue.

However, if Australia's response is to evolve, be agile and truly reflect the current evidence, then there is a pressing need for all governments to also embrace harm reduction as a critical component of their health based response to drug use.

While demonstrating real progress, the recent announcement falls short of this mark.

On the day before the announcement we sadly learnt that another young life was lost at a music festival. Despite the claims of some that the current policies are working and thus should continue, we need to stop putting lives at risk and introduce policies that are effective.

The reality remains that despite the best efforts of prevention services many people will try and use drugs for a period of time in their lives. The majority of people will actually cease drug use of their own volition as their lives develop new priorities, while others will develop problems and require support and treatment. During these periods of drug use the overriding principle should be harm reduction so that overdose and disease, as well as the long term harms caused by criminalisation, are minimised.

The prevention and treatment focus of the Federal Government response has been met with understandable relief, but it must be expanded to include harm reduction if people not engaging with the health system are also to be protected.

To complement the new approach, Harm Reduction Australia calls on the Prime Minister and his Government to truly observe the evidence and introduce harm reduction measures which include:

1. Greater collaboration with peer networks, families and non-government experts on the development of specifically targeted drug campaigns, resources and other initiatives aimed at people who use drugs (including music festival representatives) – the crucial contribution of affected communities in delivering success to our response to HIV/AIDS should never be underestimated.
2. Piloting of pill testing at venues and festivals – the international evidence clearly demonstrates the positive impact these programs have by engaging with pill users.

3. An early warning system to advise people of any potentially dangerous drugs being sold – this should be done in collaboration with ambulance and police services.
4. COAG consideration of the removal of criminal sanctions for the personal use of illicit drugs – the long term harm to a person’s employment and other opportunities from receiving a criminal record is a very disproportionate response to personal drug use.
5. Introducing a broader range of innovative and evidence informed drug dependence treatment options for clinicians.
6. Increasing community access to overdose reversing (naloxone) products.

Harm Reduction Australia is very disappointed that the Ice Taskforce report failed to recognise harm reduction as a critical component of a comprehensive response to drug use. However, it is important to understand that the report is not a review of the evidence. It is a subjective report based on selective research and predetermined consultations. Accordingly, we are not surprised by the Taskforce’s flawed conclusion on the value of harm reduction and its failure to understand the importance of affected communities. Whilst shifting the Government’s focus away from law enforcement to prevention is understandable, it is just as naïve to think that a media campaign and a prevention program will address drug use and its related harms or that education alone is the ‘silver bullet’.

It is our collective responsibility to individuals, families and the community to ensure prevention, treatment and harm reduction services are all funded appropriately to be readily accessible and available.