

HRA Statement on NSW Govt response to the Special Commission on Ice

After a 30 month wait the NSW Government finally responded to the Special Commission on Ice.

Just a reminder that this is the commission that was established by the NSW Government, where they handpicked members to review the evidence and, that cost an estimated \$14m to conduct.

The response was released by the NSW Premier who was accompanied by more law enforcement and criminal justice personnel than health personnel – a clear signal on the government’s approach to drug use.

While a focus on “treatment and diversion” is an achievement of sorts, it is unclear how much new money will go into these initiatives and how much will be directed to law enforcement/criminal justice responses. The health bureaucracy also seems to be getting a substantial proportion of health-based funding – again, with a distinct lack of details on how much of the funding announced will be spent on existing commitments rather than genuinely new initiatives.

Despite several strong recommendations from the Special Commission on harm reduction and drug law reform, all of these were summarily dismissed by the NSW Government.

No matter how strong the evidence, every time there is an opportunity for some real, meaningful change it is squandered. Inaction is inexcusable given the wealth of evidence and knowledge from lived and living experience that is now routinely available to the NSW Government.

Although some are publicly supporting the diversion initiatives announced, we know that those who are most likely to come to the attention of police are those who are least likely to be able to afford a \$400 fine (twice). People, especially those unable to pay the fines, will bear (as always) the unjustifiable long-term consequences of engagement with the criminal justice system.

Even the focus on treatment is based on the court system being the conduit into treatment, and there is little explanation on how the repeated investment in websites and information to assist people locate and understand treatment, will assist in addressing the chronic shortage of treatment places in NSW. In short, you will be able to access information *about* treatment, but just don’t plan on getting an *actual* treatment place.

In particular, HRA is infuriated that despite all the evidence to the contrary, the NSW Government has endorsed the continued use of strip searching and sniffer dogs while dismissing decriminalisation and specific programs such as pill testing.

Time and time again we see government inquiries being told by most agencies that provide services to people using drugs that our current approach is not working, and a change of direction is urgently needed. Yet, time and time again, the advice is ignored, and the approach is to give more money to policing and questionable treatment pathways such as diversion and drug courts.

This whole process has almost been a complete waste of money and time for everyone involved.

Maybe it is time for the NSW community to ignore the cowardice of governments and come together to resolve this merry go round of waste and poor outcomes to create a way forward.