

THE NSW DRUG SUMMIT

NSW Health Drug Programs Bureau

BACKGROUND

Illicit drug use has re-emerged as a major issue of political and community concern in recent years both locally and overseas. The underlying factors contributing to an expansion of illicit drug use include: the wider availability of a range of substances; persisting youth unemployment; the integration of drug use and recreational activities; and family and social dislocation.

In NSW an increasing number of fatal opiate-related overdoses, the decreasing age of initiation to injecting drug use, and a rise in the number of young people experimenting with cannabis use, have focused greater attention on:

- the quality of existing drug education and prevention programs
- the role of the criminal justice system
- the efficacy and capacity of drug treatment programs
- the need for a more coordinated and strategic response to illicit drug use across government and throughout the community.

THE PROCESS

In February 1999 the Premier of NSW announced that, if re-elected, he would convene a Parliamentary Drug Summit to stimulate fresh thought, and renewed effort, in preventing and managing illicit drug use. The Drug Summit was held over five days, 17–21 May 1999, and was attended by elected members of all parties in both Houses of Parliament.

The NSW Drug Summit consisted of debate, plenary presentations, and issues-based working parties, held within Parliament. The Summit also included visits to treatment agencies and services, and pre-Summit consultations in regional cities. National and international experts were among 100 delegates invited to provide a range of experience and expertise.

Active debate was encouraged in a bipartisan spirit, and this resulted in significant shifts in perspective on the part of some politicians.

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Consensus decision-making was the goal and the Summit passed some 160 resolutions from a much larger number that were developed by the working parties. An implementation plan is to be developed within six weeks to progress Drug Summit resolutions (for release in late July).

POLICY FRAMEWORK

The NSW Drug Summit acknowledged the importance of existing National and State drug strategies, which provide a framework for evolving government responses to a difficult social problem.

In particular, the Summit recognised the key role of the *National Drug Strategic Framework 1998–1999 to 2002–2003—Building Partnerships* (NDSF), to which all Australian jurisdictions are signatories. NDSF has been developed by the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy, which brings together the Commonwealth, State and Territory Ministers responsible for health and law enforcement. This group holds the major responsibility for collectively determining national policies and programs designed to reduce the harm caused by drugs.

OUTCOMES

The Summit was preceded by weeks of media discussion of the relative merits of a heroin trial, a proposal that most health experts (both supporters and opposers) acknowledged would have a limited impact on the drug-related problems being encountered in the health and criminal justice systems.

At the opening of the Summit, Premier Carr identified the potential for the Summit to become: ‘some sort of factionalised debate between the advocates of removing the legal prohibition on heroin on the one hand, and those who argue for a continuation of prohibition on the other hand—that is, a war on the drugs versus legalisation; zero tolerance versus harm reduction.’

While this debate was present throughout the proceedings, the Summit developed a solid framework of

recommendations for future action in this State by concentrating on particular issues such as: training, education, treatment, and diversion of minor drug offenders from the criminal justice system into treatment programs.

Recommendations included:

- recognition of the benefit of diverting drug users away from the criminal justice system into treatment;
- models of ‘support coordination’ to be piloted that link clients accessing NSPs and treatment programs to social services including: housing, employment, child care, education and training;
- an understanding of the complexity of illicit drug use and a realisation that no one treatment is able to provide a ‘cure’ to drug misuse;
- improved community involvement in preventing and managing illicit drug use, with the development of localised responses;
- a call for more treatment places with appropriate levels of funding;
- a system of accreditation for treatment clinics and programs to improve the quality of overall delivery;
- the possibility of non-government organisations establishing medically-supervised injecting facilities;
- expansion of general practitioner and pharmacist involvement in delivering drug treatment;
- significant expansion of current drug and alcohol training programs, both at a specialist and generalist level;
- proposed introduction of Drug Action Teams across the State to better manage and coordinate policy and programs;
- local communities to develop effective local responses.

A later issue of the *NSW Public Health Bulletin* will include a summary of the Government response with a particular emphasis of the implications for the NSW public health system. ☒

ANNOUNCING A SERIES ON DRUG AND ALCOHOL ISSUES FOR NSW

Over the coming months the *NSW Public Health Bulletin* will publish a series of articles focusing on drug and alcohol use in the population of NSW. Limited information is currently available estimating the extent of drug use in NSW, and this series will provide a relevant and timely overview. The series will discuss policy directions, and present a range of information, including NSW data obtained from the 1998 National Drug Strategy Household Survey (NDSHS) on illicit drug, alcohol, and tobacco use.