

Fighting illicit drugs with intelligence information



01: Opium poppies

For the first time an expanded capability to capture, analyse and disseminate information about illicit drugs will be available to all Australian policing jurisdictions.

The AFP's Australian Illicit Drug Data Centre (AIDDC) was opened on 18 February by the Minister for Home Affairs, Brendan O'Connor.

Together with the Australian Bomb Data Centre and the Australian Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Data Centre, the AIDDC plays an essential role in analysing information and advising law enforcement agencies and government authorities on the threats posed by materials that can injure or harm Australians.

Mr O'Connor said the Centre's opening marked a significant step forward in the fight against illicit drugs.

"In opening the Australian Illicit Drug Data Centre we are helping to close a gap in the intelligence picture," he said.

For the first time, all Australian police forces are able to access data providing information about where a drug has come from, and where it was manufactured. This process is known as drug profiling, and forensic scientists use it to identify a drug's chemical signature. This provides valuable intelligence information to police about drug smuggling routes and the way illicit drugs are distributed within Australia.

Previously, this information has only been available on drugs seized at the Australian border. Through new agreements with the AIDDC, all state and territory jurisdictions will now participate in this program and provide samples from drug seizures made on the streets.

"We are able to combine the resources we need with an enhanced level of cooperation between agencies to combat criminal operations seeking to exploit vulnerable members of our community," Mr O'Connor said.

The AIDDC has a secondary role, which is to work with health and education professionals in reducing demand for illicit drugs and minimising the harm such substances cause. This is in line with the objectives of the Australian Drug Strategy. It may also be a first for an Australian law enforcement intelligence unit, as traditionally policing agencies have had a very limited role in this area of activity, tending to focus on supply reduction measures.

The AIDDC will also work with government agencies in assessing the risk posed by the diversion of precursor chemicals into manufacturing illicit drugs. This is because many of the chemicals used during illegal drug manufacture also have a range of legitimate uses across science and industry, and banning them outright would cause significant disruption to genuine businesses. However it is also unreasonable to allow unfettered access to such chemicals, as this creates opportunities for organised criminal networks to manufacture illicit drugs, including amphetamine-type substances (ATS).

Assessing the risk of precursor substances involves the provision of dedicated expert resources including specialist knowledge

of forensic drug chemistry, risk assessment methodologies, related chemical industries and strategic law enforcement intelligence. Developing expertise in these areas requires significant investment and resourcing over a period of time, and the AIDDC has been able to draw on a wealth of existing capabilities and knowledge.

The first steps were taken in the 1980s, when the AFP and Australian Government Analytical Laboratory (AGAL) began to undertake forensic examination, sampling and presumptive testing on substances seized at Australia's borders. In 1997 the Federal Government established the National Heroin Signature Program as part of its strategy to reduce the amount of heroin being smuggled into Australia. The program physically and chemically profiled seizures of heroin and their packing materials to generate strategic and tactical forensic drug intelligence. The AFP's Joint Drug Intelligence Team collated and disseminated this information to the rest of the organisation and other relevant agencies.

By 2002 the changing nature of illicit drug use within Australia resulted in the program's expansion to include the analysis of cocaine and amphetamine-type substances such as MDMA (ecstasy) and methylamphetamine (most commonly known as ICE). In line with its expanded area of responsibility, the program changed its name to the Australian Illicit Drug Intelligence Program (AIDIP).

At around the same time the AGAL merged with the National Measurement Laboratory to form the National Measurement Institute (NMI). This agency now provides law enforcement agencies with a sophisticated chemical analysis capability that supports strategic and tactical intelligence in an effort to restrict drug trafficking across Australian borders and obtain successful prosecutions of drug traffickers. Over the past five years the chemical program at NMI has expanded and matured significantly and its methods have been developed in consultation with best practice standards throughout the world.

In 2008 a report from the National Institute of Forensic Science identified a gap in the national intelligence picture on illicit drugs. Drugs seized at the borders were being analysed, but there was very limited information on those seized on the streets.

The AIDDC was formed to bring all the relevant groups and agencies together to provide a holistic picture of illicit drugs within Australia, and to close the intelligence gap between national and state jurisdictions. It is hoped this revitalised approach towards illicit drugs within Australia will be used by law enforcement at all levels improve their effectiveness against illicit drug traffickers and producers.

The AIDDC will also work closely with Australia's international partners as part of the effort to

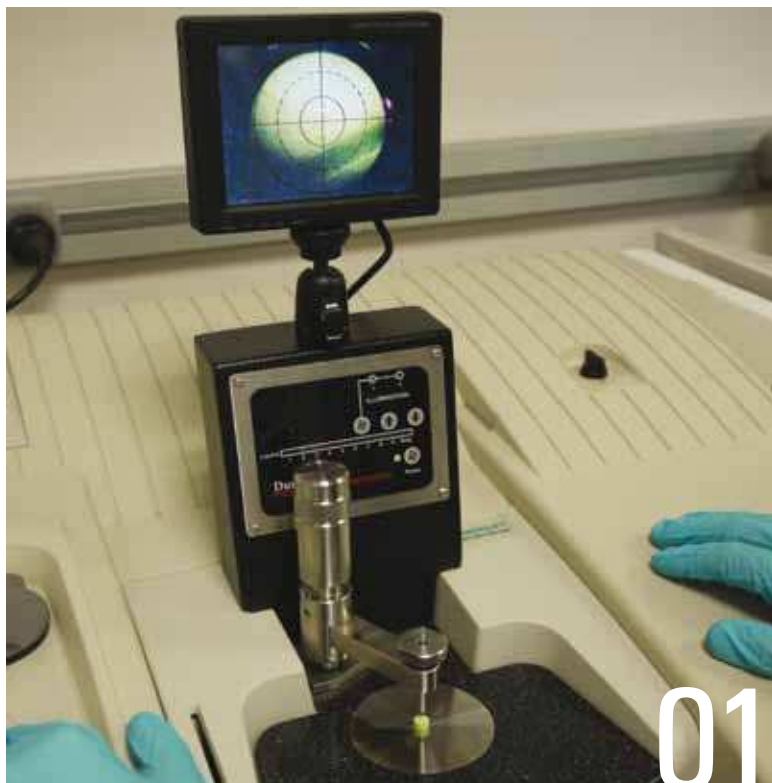
combat the global network of illicit drug manufacture. A key partner in this effort is the United States Drug Enforcement Administration (USDEA), which has worked closely with NMI in the development of new research methods.

These include the creation of compatible forensic drug intelligence capabilities in relation to the analysis of heroin and cocaine. For MDMA the NMI turned to European agencies, because of the drug's prevalence within that region. Through international collaboration and its own research, the institute has developed a robust capacity to generate a wide

range of information for law enforcement agencies.

The NMI is also responsible for developing reference standards for previously unseen substances. This provides the AFP and other law enforcement agencies with significant scientific support in prosecuting criminal syndicates engaged in the production of emerging drugs, including amphetamine-type substances with slightly altered chemical structures.

It will work closely with the AIDDC to continue this work, and develop new methodologies as the need arises.





01: An AFP scientist uses a Fourier Transform Infrared Spectrometer to identify the chemicals present in an illicit drug sample. **02:** An AFP forensic scientist examines a drug seizure **03:** Commissioner Negus and Mr O'Connor shake hands after the unveiling of the plaque at the opening ceremony

It's a development welcomed by the AFP's former National Manager Forensic and Data Centres, Dr James Robertson. Throughout his 20-year career with the AFP he worked tirelessly towards the formation of a body such as the AIDDC.

"When I first started with the AFP, I was tasked with managing the drug analysis laboratory, and working with AGAL to build an intelligence database on drugs, particularly on marijuana," Dr Robertson said.

"The critical picture for police is developed from the analysis of drugs seized at the border and also at street level.

"So the opening of the AIDDC adds another perspective to the complete intelligence picture on dangerous substances, complementing the work done by its sister agencies the Australian Chemical, Biological, Radiological and Nuclear Data Centre, and the Australian Bomb Data Centre."

In December 2009 the Minister for Home Affairs announced more than seven million dollars of funding from the proceeds of crime would be provided to the AFP over four years to operate the AIDDC. This means that money seized from criminal enterprises is being used to combat the very operations it came from.

The AFP has welcomed the formation of a new data centre to combat illicit drug use in Australia. The work being done by the AIDDC presents Australian law enforcement agencies and other interested stakeholders with new opportunities to build a more comprehensive intelligence picture of Australia's illicit drug scene. Over time, this will play an integral role in combating criminal syndicates which seek to gain from preying on vulnerable members of our community.

