

At What Cost...

A recent report by the Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia is a timely reminder of the impact that drugs are having on our society. The report, *A New Agenda for Harm Reduction*, is a comprehensive policy agenda that advocates 10 key action areas of change that will assist all people working to reduce drug related harm. ADCA's aim, as highlighted in the report, is to have an Australian community in which health and well-being is supported, and alcohol and other drug related harm is prevented or substantially reduced.



*In 1996 it was estimated that 18,580 people died from tobacco-related causes.
Photograph by Pip Blackwood, NewsPix.*

The Drugs Council endorses the drug abuse inquiry currently being undertaken by the House of Representatives Family and Community Affairs Committee. This inquiry into drug abuse and how much of an impact legal and illegal drugs have on our society will focus on the social and economic costs to the community, in particular how drug abuse affects:

- family relationships;
- crime, violence (including domestic violence) and law enforcement;
- road trauma;
- workplace safety and productivity; and
- health care costs.

For more information on the Drug Abuse inquiry being undertaken by the House Family and Community Affairs Committee call (02) 6277 4566 or visit: www.apf.gov.au/house/committee/fca

What the Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia said

The following extract from the Drug Council's report is an overview of drug issues in Australia.

Drugs are playing an ever-increasing role in the lives of mainstream Australia. The majority of Australians consume some form of caffeine and/or alcohol on a regular basis, and use prescribed or over the counter medications. One quarter of the population use tobacco regularly and about half the population have used illicit drugs (such as marijuana) at some point in their lives.

General drug use is an accepted part of most societies. The majority of Australians, through the consumption of tea, coffee, cola drinks and chocolate use caffeine. One half of the Australian population regularly consume alcohol and 22 per cent regularly use tobacco. An additional 35 per cent of Australians use some form of pharmaceutical drug on a regular basis.

About half the population has used drugs, currently listed as illicit, including cannabis, at some stage of their lifetime, with cannabis being by far the most commonly used illicit drug. Cannabis, for example, has been used by more than 44 per cent of the Australian population over their lifetime, and has been recently used by 21 per cent.

Many Australians are consuming drugs at harmful levels. As noted, 22 per cent of Australians consume tobacco daily, with the majority of these smoking 11 or more cigarettes per day. Approximately 18 per cent of males and seven per cent of females consume seven or more standard drinks on any one occasion. Approximately 100,000 Australians (0.7%) have injected illicit drugs in the past 12 months. Twelve thousand of these were teenagers but the majority were aged 20-29.

It should be noted that this data is based on national figures, and that there are significant variations between regions throughout Australia.

The misuse of all drugs, however, brings enormous economic, health and social costs to the Australian community. Approximately one fifth of all deaths are drug-related. More than 17,000 people are hospitalised each year from the misuse of drugs. The economic cost of drug misuse has been estimated at more than \$18 billion annually.

In 1996 it was estimated that 18,580 people died from tobacco-related causes, 3,656 from alcohol-related causes and 739 people from conditions associated with illicit drug use. Legal drugs therefore, account for nearly 95 per cent of all drug-related deaths.

The economic cost due to the misuse of drugs was estimated at \$18 billion in 1992, this includes the cost of prevention, treatment, and property crime, lost workplace productivity and law enforcement activities. The misuse of tobacco was related to 67 per cent of these costs, alcohol 24 per cent and illicit drugs nine per cent. It should be noted that these costs do not incorporate the significant costs to the health system arising from passive smoking.

The misuse of drugs also generates significant social costs. These include alcohol related violence, road accidents, poorer health through passive smoking, the need for a well-resourced criminal justice system, police corruption, impacts on family relationships and carer/parenting abilities and loss of employment. The costs of drug misuse are often hidden, with large populations of the community misusing drugs without coming into contact with the health or criminal justice systems.

For copies of ADCA's *A New Agenda for Harm Reduction* call ADCA on (02) 6281 0686, visit: www.adca.org.au or email: adca@adca.org.au