

On the drugs crisis

19 February 1999

To the Editor,

I am writing in response to the letter on the New South Wales state government's proposed drug summit. RW detailed the lack of detoxification facilities for those afflicted by drug and alcohol addiction. He pointed correctly to the fraudulent nature of the "concern" expressed by the Carr Labor government and the Liberal Party opposition towards the increasing problem of drug addiction.

I would like to add some additional comments. The events that surrounded the Labor government's decision to close down a needle exchange program for intravenous drug users--aimed at preventing the spread of AIDS-HIV and hepatitis through the sharing of needles--gave one a glimpse of how public opinion is moulded and government policy implemented.

In response to a front-page Sunday newspaper photograph of a young boy, described as 12 or 13 years of age, injecting heroin, Health Minister Andrew Refshauge immediately announced the shut down of the program, which operated in a laneway in the inner-city suburb of Redfern, frequently used by heroin addicts.

On further investigation, the youth photographed by the *Sun-Herald* turned out to be an unemployed 16-year-old from the working class western Sydney suburb of Whalan, where youth unemployment rates are soaring above 50 percent.

The *Sun-Herald* editorialised: "It would be easy to suggest the NSW Health Department, which operates 319 needle exchange outlets and hands out nine million syringes at a cost of some \$9 million a year is partly to blame. Some might say supplying a needle, spoon and instructions on how to use them is aiding the distribution chain."

The clear aim was to demand that the government cease funding these programs. For big business such funding represents a deduction in the potential profits that can be extracted from society.

The same editorial said: "In 1964, only six heroin-related deaths were recorded. Now, the NSW Ambulance Service is called to average 13 overdose cases every day. And the problem is not confined to the city. Its effects are rapidly spreading to the bush."

One would expect the question to be raised: what is causing the dramatic increase in drug use? The articles and editorials of not only the *Sun-Herald* but all the capitalist media avoid such questions like the plague. To answer them objectively would inevitably point to an examination of the society that has produced this horrendous situation.

Instead, the campaign for the March 27 state election has been characterized by a frenzied "law and order" bidding war between the Labor and Liberal/National parties. Unable to offer any measures to address the underlying social crisis, they are vying to outdo each other in criminalising young people and strengthening police powers.

The decision to close down the needle exchange program has provoked widespread criticism among health professionals and drug rehabilitation specialists.

David Crosbie, chief executive of the Alcohol and Other Drugs Council of Australia, was quoted in the press stating: "No-one likes to see kids injecting drugs, but anyone who believes that closing a needle syringe exchange program is somehow going to stop kids using drugs is missing the point entirely. Imagine the problem if these kids weren't able to get clean syringes. They're suddenly at risk for a whole range of blood-borne disease like hepatitis C and HIV-AIDS."

Anti-drugs campaigner Tony Trimingham, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "We're in election mode and politicians from both sides are promoting policies that they think appeal to popular demand, but I'm actually not so sure that they are reading it correctly. We are looking for new ways of dealing with the heroin problem, not back to the dark old days of coming down hard with law enforcement and shutting things down."

Deaths from heroin overdoses in Australia have risen to the highest level in history--600 a year--and increasing a staggering 10 percent in just 12 months. In New South Wales, according to a study produced by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, deaths rose by 13 percent between 1996 and 1997. NSW accounts for half the nation's deaths from opiate overdoses.

Catherine Spooner, a researcher with the Centre, pointed to the emerging pattern of increased drug use among younger people. "The illicit drug reporting system does seem to show that we have an increase in heroin and cocaine use and a decrease in the age of people using them. There has been a very high increase in heroin use among 14 to 18 year olds."

Professor Wayne Hall, the Centre's executive director, said the 1997 national figures showed Australia was in the grip of a "contagion which began about three years ago, striking vulnerable disadvantaged youth, but with a lot of middle class kids caught up in it as well." In discussing possible solutions, he commented: "The biggest factor requires public money and is a fairly substantial increase in treatment capacity. You need to pull a lot more heroin users into treatment. The death rate would improve. We might also end up being able to reduce the demand for heroin and reduce the scale of the illicit market."

The facilities that exist are minimal. Only 24 beds exist for juvenile detoxification programs in NSW, mostly provided not by the government, but by church and welfare organisations. The NSW Health Department provides just 259 beds dedicated to adult detoxification programs. Yet there are about 200,000 drug users nationally, of whom approximately 62,000 live in NSW.

The largest provider of drug rehabilitation and detoxification services in NSW is the Salvation Army. Its spokesman, Major Brian Waters, said the demand for help from drug addicts was so huge that the Salvation Army could double the number of beds available and fill them immediately. Waters said his organisation turned 30 addicts away from its 120-bed inner city centre every week. "Demand is even greater than this. People get to know there are not enough beds and don't bother trying."

The Carr government's five-day drug summit is scheduled to take place after the March 27 election.

There is a purpose for this delay. It is to ensure that law and order remains the central theme of the election and above all prevent any discussion on the social conditions that have been created by the Labor government and the profit system as a whole. These include mass unemployment, poverty, the slashing of social services and the lack of cheap recreational activities for young people.

Many people are appalled and concerned with the problem of drug and alcohol abuse. No doubt the image of a young teenager injecting himself with heroin in an inner city laneway had the effect of producing a sense of shock and dismay.

Yes, indeed something needs to be done. That requires a recognition, first and foremost, that drug addiction is a symptom of a diseased social order that offers the young, in particular, no solution. Complete reorganisation along socialist lines is needed to provide young people with decent secure jobs, and access to a full range of educational, sporting and recreational activities. Such a program will also provide the resources to establish first-class facilities for the treatment of drug addiction and other social ills.

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