

## The long term fix: what is the future of the drug sector in Victoria?

VAADA's 2003 annual conference title reflected a growing sense of uncertainty about the future of the drug sector in Victoria. With a myriad of recent reviews underway and the sector being consulted extensively in recent months, there has been much opportunity for contemplating the future.

The reviews include the episodes of care, Victorian Government Drug Initiatives and, of course, the service system review. The sector is aware of the tighter funding environment in which services operate.

The conference aimed to focus beyond immediate concerns, and consider broader trends in government - non government relations, organisational strategy, and the way other sectors have dealt with similar pressures. These directions were canvassed in the opening presentation by an excellent line up of speakers.

Minister Gavin Jennings outlined the need for social improvements to be informed by uniform policy communities that can provide sound evidence and succinct policy solutions to government. He highlighted the need for the community not to become complacent about important social issues given that economic growth doesn't necessarily translate into social improvements. The importance of local level partnerships ('people and place') underlined the Minister's message about the need for positive local communities that can generate positive health outcomes.

Cath Smith, CEO, VCOSS, outlined the progressive trend for governments to present economic prosperity in terms of 'tight' fiscal environments. Cath talked about the need for the NGO sector to consider future sustainability underpinned by local communities and cross sectoral linkages (Cath writes the "Your say" piece this month).

Roger Clifton, Managing Director, McCann Erickson advertising, outlined the realities of working in an industry driven by awards, creativity and successful work rather than the often perceived 'deviousness'.

Community attitudes in relation to alcohol advertising were outlined.

Paula Beauchamp, social affairs reporter at the *Herald Sun* newspaper highlighted the extent to which the AOD sector has been instrumental in changing social attitudes in the past. Paula urged the sector to recognise that media is ultimately a business, not a 'community newsletter'. While acknowledging that the media isn't always perfect in the way it presents sensitive social issues, Paula challenged the sector to use the media to its best advantage as a powerful tool to generate debate and change social opinion.

Dr Alison Ritter, author of the service system review, presented an outline of major findings and addressed audience questions and comments in a plenary discussion (facilitated by Associate Professor Terry Laidler). The session provided a good opportunity for the sector to have its say about the review, the concerns and possibilities. VAADA would like to thank the many people who contributed to the session – all very worthwhile in assisting VAADA in its task of reporting back to DHS on the sector's views.

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*Members of VAADA's Board 'On the Spot' at the 2003 VAADA Conference  
L-R: Stephen Mihaly, Neos Zavrou, Janet Farrow, Rodger Brough and Trevor King*

## Month in Review

### Workforce development – launch of national AERF funded collaboration

The Alcohol Education and Rehabilitation Foundation (AERF) funded national collaborative project on workforce development was launched at the VAADA conference. VAADA would like to thank the AERF for their support of this project.

Speakers included AERF Deputy CEO, Tracey Purdam, and AERF Executive Board Director, David Crosbie, who welcomed the outcomes of the jurisdiction reports and literature review, noting the importance of this issue for the sector.

Directors of the three state peak bodies involved in the project presented findings from the jurisdiction consultations undertaken with AOD workers.

Professor Ann Roche (Director, National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction (NCETA)) outlined findings from the literature review.

If the starting point for providing quality services to people with drug problems is dependent upon the quality of staff (and various pieces of research confirm this), then we need to focus on developing and supporting effective staff. The project has highlighted the extent to which there is a level of frustration across the sector about significant barriers to enable us to do this well.

VAADA Executive Officer, Carol Bennett, outlined a number of areas of weakness common to all states including:

- Salary, terms and conditions
- Training and professional development
- Supervision and support
- Professional and career development
- Complexity of roles
- Evaluation (including the need to demonstrate the value of drug treatment and implement quality improvement systems)
- Public profile of the AOD sector.

Areas of difference reflected specific state policies such as unit costing in Victoria.

The consultations have raised a number of questions about the way forward for the AOD sector in developing and maintaining quality services for people with alcohol and drug problems. Fundamentally, the major barrier is resourcing and commitment of governments.

The challenge is to find ways that governments can demonstrate the value to the community of investing in workforce development activities (there are some good models for this in teaching and policing). The premise is that when governments are accountable to the community for particular activities, they are more likely to invest in them.

A third stage of the project will provide a national framework for further action on an issue of major significance to the AOD sector.



*Workforce Development project team  
L-R: Front: Tracey Purdam (AERF), Carol Bennett (VAADA), Ann Roche (NCETA), Jill Rundle (WANADA)  
Back: Jodie Egan (AERF), Vanessa Long (NADA) and Larry Pierce (NADA)*

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The conference also played host to a competent and insightful group of sector presenters in a range of areas. Also this year, two sector organisations took the opportunity provided by the conference to launch major reports. Narcotics Anonymous (in celebrating its worldwide 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary) launched a report marking 26 years of NA in Victoria, based on a survey of 250 members. UnitingCare Moreland Hall launched their new 'Big Book on Party Drugs'. Participants at the conference welcomed these new reports.

In the spirit of listening and responding to our members, the VAADA board was 'on the spot' in the closing session. The take home message from the session was a call for VAADA to continue to promote the sector and its work loudly and proudly.

VAADA would like to thank those who attended and presented papers at the conference, conference committee, keynote speakers and sponsors VicHealth and the City of Greater Dandenong.

## YOUR SAY

**Ms Cath Smith**

**Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS)**

### *“The Victorian Drug and Alcohol Sector – Facing the Future”*

VCOSS acts both an ‘industry peak’, and a social policy voice, responding to the social and economic disadvantaged in Victoria. While a member of ACOSS, our primary focus is state government policy and the well-being of Victorians.

In 2003, VCOSS coordinated a combined peaks campaign around the new DHS funding model for community care, disability and housing. The new multi-year model provides greater certainty, but allocates indexation of only 2.4%, 2.25%, and 2.25% over three years and contains clauses covering ‘exceptional circumstances’ which do not guarantee full funding of wage increases.

VAADA has been an active member of the VCOSS combined peaks campaign against the index, and by working together across the state and across the sectors, we have achieved widespread media coverage of funding issues in the community sector, a more empowered and unified sector, a slightly improved level of indexation and a commitment by Government to review a number of generic clauses in 2,700 Funding and Service Agreements (FASAs) for 2004-05.

The indexation issue is now subject to a medium term sector-wide campaign leading up to the 2006 Election if necessary.

What have we learnt this year about campaigning and advocacy with the Bracks Government and what factors will influence the efficacy of the community sector, in achieving their aims over the next few years?

We know that the economic climate will play a part. Despite the Victorian economy being relatively healthy, we will need to negotiate and respond to progressively ‘tight’ economic environments. We have the lowest public debt in decades. Yet Victorians are experiencing the highest personal and household debt ever.

The political climate is important. The electoral confidence of our Government will impact on decision-making and we need to also pay heed to the political climate within our own sector. Issues such as competition warrant attention and respect for the realities of doing business as well as nurturing a collaborative approach where possible.

At a Federal Government level, the proposed new charities legislation and calls for greater ‘accountability’ (sic) creates further pressure on agencies concerned about the impact of policy on their clients and the community more broadly. We risk turning back the clock 400 years with an extremely outdated notion of ‘charity’ being enforced by the Australian Tax Office.

Our own constituencies are calling for better services, for shorter waiting lists, more follow-up support, more early intervention and prevention, universal access to services, and recognition of human rights in all areas of service delivery. It is our obligation to work closely with our clients and friends in the community to help build an argument for change, not to respond defensively.

The media and communications climate is also of great interest and relevance as we consider how to influence government policy.

It is imperative we take into account that effective communication is required with the community, we need to focus on a safe community for all, and universal access to opportunities.

Of course it will always be easy for commercial media to demonise young people, people in close contact with the justice system and drug users. Our job is to educate, re-frame issues to explain issues of justice simply, and to build empathy.

It’s a maxim of any policy or advocacy project - when we hit a road block we need to find a way around it. One way is to join something larger than ourselves. This might be to join your peak body, or a cross-sector peak, such as VCOSS. It might also entail joining a broader alliance – such as the current Fairer Australia ‘Fair Go’ campaign, auspiced by Trades Hall, involving about 60 unions and community groups under an umbrella of basic human rights. (See [fairgocampaign.net](http://fairgocampaign.net)).

As non-government organisations we need to respond to competition – and attack the policies, not each other – and not the public servants who deliver the policy. One senior public servant told me a few months ago (during our campaign) *“Don’t bother threatening to hand back services, we’ll easily find someone else who’ll tender for it”*



*photo by Ponch Hawkes*

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## Calendar of Events

<b>Advance Notice:</b> 4 February	<b><i>Hypnosis and Anxiety Management. Half Day Training – TRANX</i></b> Presented by Efthimia Doumias, Counsellor with qualifications in Hypnosis from 9.30am to 12.30pm. To register contact Anne at 9886 0955 or email <a href="mailto:tomi@tranx.org.au">tomi@tranx.org.au</a> . Cost \$55 + \$5 GST. Venue to be advised.
<b>Advance Notice:</b> 13 February	<b><i>Rethinking theory and practice in Indigenous alcohol and other drug usage - Turning Point Talking Point Seminar Series</i></b> Lunch time seminar from 1pm-2pm. Presented by Gregory Philips, VicHealth Koori Health Research and Development Unit. The seminar will be held in the Turning Point Training Room, 142 Gertrude Street Fitzroy. Bookings essential – call Turning Point on 8413 8413.
<b>Advance Notice:</b> 26 March	<b><i>National Anxiety Disorders Conference 2004 - PADA (Panic and Anxiety Disorders Assistance) Recovery, Risks and Resources</i></b> To be held at the Darebin Arts & Entertainment Centre, Preston. For program details, call Anne Smarelli 03 9886 0649 or visit <a href="http://www.pada.org.au">www.pada.org.au</a>
<b>Advance Notice:</b> 18-20 April	<b><i>Club Health 2004 - 3rd International Conference on Nightlife, Substance Use and Related Health Issues</i></b> To be held in Melbourne, Club Health 2004 will provide an international forum for debate and exchange of information on nightlife policy and practice. Conference information, abstract submission forms and registration forms are available on the Club Health website <a href="http://www.clubhealth.org.uk">www.clubhealth.org.uk</a> or on request from <a href="mailto:clubhealth@livjm.ac.uk">clubhealth@livjm.ac.uk</a> .
<b>Advance Notice:</b> 20-24 April	<b><i>15<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Reduction of Drug Related Harm. International Harm Reduction Association.</i></b> To be held in Melbourne. For further details Telephone 9278 8104 or fax 9328 3008

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**Ms Cath Smith**  
**Chief Executive Officer, (VCOSS)**

***“The Victorian Drug and Alcohol Sector – Facing the Future”***

This may or may not be true but it opens the need for specific sectors in specific regions to develop a sense of unity and strategies to avert being set against each other.

We need to work creatively with Government. There are pro’s and con’s in behaving as either a ‘cheer squadder’ or a ‘rock chucker’. A balance is required.

There are some interesting opportunities with our current Government. The commitment to community building by the Department for Victorian Communities has much potential and may help us leverage ourselves out from being grumpy contractors to DHS into a more functional relationship with Government.

The commitment to ‘partnership’ within key departments (e.g. DHS) enables constructive negotiation and leverage at key times. This year, without the Funded Agency Partnership Agreement we would have had a very serious stand-off with DHS over the price index. Instead we managed to keep talking, even at very tense moments during the public campaign.

There are opportunities to be had when issues are front page. Governments are at their most inclined to get the issue off the front page. However, there are also opportunities when issues are not in the media. This enables ‘whisper in the ear’ policy influencing at times when its not a ‘public crisis’ – arguably there may be significant room to influence as public health advocates, rather than during a front page ‘crime and punishment’ melee.

These comments are my personal reflections but I’m happy to respond to feedback [cath.smith@vcoss.org.au](mailto:cath.smith@vcoss.org.au)



***The VAADA Staff Team (left) and Board would like to thank all members and supporters for their input into VAADA in 2003.***

***We look forward to an even bigger and better year in 2004.***