



July 08

- Sustainability & Sector Unity
- A RawDeal: Where to From Here?
- VAADA's Recent Policy Activity
- Letters from the Sector
- Events Calendar

**Sustainability & Sector Unity**

At the recent AOD sector CEO and Managers Network meeting held on the 18 July, attendees had the opportunity to meet and discuss a number of issues impacting the sector with the three principal trade unions providing coverage to the Victorian NGO drug treatment system.

VAADA is appreciative of the time and commitment shown by Lisa Darmanin (Assistant Branch Secretary - Australian Services Union), Jo Tomlins (Industrial Services Co-ordinator – HACSU) and Donna Hansen (Mental Health IR Organiser ANF-Vic); particularly their insights and thought provoking views about the issues faced by the AOD service system.

While the invitation sought to clarify a number of issues related to current award simplification processes and challenges facing the sector, it also sought to explore areas where collaborative efforts could meet these challenges. Discussions focussed on particular problems related to the development of realistic funding models, cohesive workforce development and preservation of the unique identity and skills of the AOD sector.

In addressing the meeting it was recognised that there is a need for improvement of the wages and conditions of those employed under the SACS awards which remain the bulk of employees in the AOD sector. Lisa identified that in her view the biggest impediment to workers enjoying adequate pay and conditions is the inappropriate funding levels under which Victorian drug treatment NGOs are expected to operate.

All guest speakers spoke of the growing gulf between public sector services and NGOs in relation to funding, wages and conditions. It was noted that currently some public sector enterprises are negotiating their fourth generation Enterprise Bargaining Agreement, whereas most workplaces within the Victorian AOD NGO system don't even have an agreement.

The speakers drew attention to the fact that one of the sectors strengths arises from its diverse workforce which in turn can provide multidisciplinary responses. This was also identified as one of the areas which have been easily exploited in funding negotiations and the resulting funding levels. In response the speakers suggested the importance of sector collaboration in negotiating multi-employer agreements around base funding levels. They emphasised that it is critical that this process embeds wages in negotiations around funding agreements.

It was pointed out by Jo Tomkins that while funders may say that sector efficiency and viability isn't always about money and that this may be correct, other important issues for consideration relate to workload issues, professional recognition of qualifications, and the impact of an employment

environment with limited career pathways for its employees.

Donna Hansen urged that the sector drive its own training and education needs and noted that AOD training offered to nurses and doctors in undergraduate courses is virtually nonexistent, while the provision of AOD related courses in TAFES and tertiary institutions is patchy. A view was expressed that current training seems to be a one-way street, in which staff are required to up skill with qualifications that aren't formally recognised. Further that this enables staff to do work that they aren't remunerated for, and nor are their employers funded to deliver any recognition of increased skills.

The impact of this gets played out when workers within the AOD sector end up doing comparable work to their peers in other sectors which for various reasons by want of working in the AOD field isn't recognised either in terms of status or remuneration.

While a range of messages arose from the meeting key themes revolved around the need for better collaboration, articulation of the issues and the importance of a strong and sustainable drug treatment system working collaboratively as a sector.



Sam Biondo (VAADA EO) with (from R to L) Donna Hansen (ANF), Jo Tomlins (HACSU) and Lisa Darmanin (ASU)

**Sam Biondo - VAADA EO**

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## A Raw Deal: Where to From Here?

James Rowe, Centre for Applied Social Research (RMIT)

The recently released report, 'A Raw Deal? Impact on the Health Consumers Relative to the Cost of Pharmacotherapy' examines the impact of dispensing fees on pharmacotherapy clients and provides a clear-cut case for policy reform. The report has been welcomed by many in the alcohol and drug field as a significant step forward in a process of sustained advocacy towards policy change.

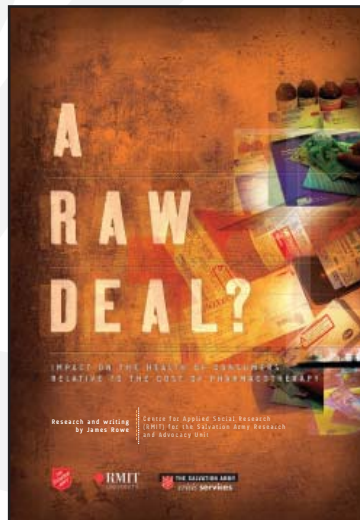
The report provides clear evidence that there is an urgent need to address the increasingly inequitable situation for many thousands of financially vulnerable pharmacotherapy clients. The report draws attention to the financial burden borne by pharmacotherapy clients as a result of discriminatory and unjustified treatment of individuals whose health issue relates to opioid dependence as opposed to another chronic health condition.

The proposed remedy is to subsidise dispensing fees that, under the current Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS), are charged fully to clients receiving opioid maintenance pharmacotherapies. As an emergency interim measure, it is recommended that the Victorian Government immediately move to extend the subsidisation of opioid maintenance programs to all financially vulnerable clients (i.e. those with health care cards). Some of the findings leading to these recommendations include:

- Opioid maintenance treatment (OMT) is one of the most successful treatments for opioid dependency (and success is directly correlated with retention in treatment);
- OMT provides dependent individuals with the stability needed to address issues such as housing and health – as well as underlying issues that may contribute to their drug use;
- The Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme (PBS) discriminates against those on OMT by failing to subsidise dispensing fees for those on programs;
- Clients often prioritise the payment of dispensing fees over necessities, including food and accommodation and are compelled to rely on community services to meet their needs. Some engage in illicit activities to meet the financial obligations of treatment;
- The inability to pay dispensing fees is the single greatest obstacle to retention in (as well as entering into) OMT;
- That involuntary discontinuance of treatment is invariably followed by a return to problematic heroin use.

Since its release, the report has generated interest from local and national media, and, more importantly, key policy makers. A spokesperson for the Federal Health Minister has stated that arrangements for the dispensing of OMT are currently under examination as part of the Community Pharmacy Agreements to be renegotiated in the near future.

Long-term advocates believe the release of *A Raw Deal* opens a rare 'window of opportunity' and have formed a coalition to develop and implement a coordinated advocacy strategy. The Pharmacy Guild of Australia (Victorian Branch); the Chapter of Addiction Medicine within the Royal Australasian College of Physicians; the Victorian Drug and Alcohol Committee of the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners; and the Salvation Army are just a few of the stakeholders now taking action.



For the first time, there seems to be momentum for change at both the state and federal level with the Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy (MCDS) scheduled to discuss a submission from the Tasmanian Department of Health and Human Services recommending full subsidisation of dispensing fees for OMT.

Victorian stakeholders recognise the need for urgent yet coordinated policy advocacy. As a first step, meetings with state policy makers will be scheduled to discuss the report's recommendations and steps for further action. We must act knowing that the Commonwealth will bear the financial cost of proposed

reforms while the State and Territory governments will benefit most from retaining opioid dependent individuals in treatment (in terms of savings to the criminal justice and public health systems). Consequently, reform is perhaps best sought by State and Territory representatives making a unified submission to their Commonwealth colleagues – whether through the means of the MCDS, the Council of Australian Governments or another forum.

The evidence for reform of existing PBS arrangements is compelling and the nature of the reform required remains urgent. The inclusion of methadone, buprenorphine and buprenorphine/naloxone combinations alongside other medications in Section 85 of the *National Health Act 1953* would ensure equity of access to treatment for those suffering from health conditions – and opioid dependence is explicitly acknowledged as a health condition by every government across Australia.

## VAADA's Recent Policy Activity

In recent months VAADA has been engaged in a number of policy discussions at both the state and federal level and provided written submissions to several Parliamentary Inquiries. These include two Senate Inquiries, namely the Inquiry into the Alcohol Toll Reduction Bill (tabled 18 June 2008) and the Inquiry into Ready-to-Drink alcohol beverages (tabled on 24 June 2008). In both of those submissions, VAADA welcomed the greater national focus on alcohol while emphasising that our response should extend beyond youth and teenage drinking to consider other age groups and broader cultural attitudes to alcohol and the impact in social, economic and health terms.

VAADA has been consistent in our call for the development of a mix of targeted and population based strategies as part of a comprehensive approach to address alcohol-related harm. One of our key messages across submissions has been the need to provide further resourcing (including funding) for drug treatment services to address what VAADA believes is a growing 'gap' between capacity and demand.

In June, VAADA responded to a call for submissions on the national homelessness Green Paper titled Which Way Home? A New Approach to Homelessness. VAADA hosted a small discussion group with drug and alcohol service providers to inform the development of our response which focused on the nexus between drug use and homelessness. We noted that any response to homelessness needs to invest in all forms of affordable housing and better match available housing to client needs. For instance, clients exiting drug treatment need access to safe, stable and appropriate housing to support their long-term recovery.

VAADA has also provided feedback to the AFL on their draft alcohol policy; the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) Guidelines for Preventive Activities in General Practice and the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund's environmental scan.

Our policy activity continues in July as we develop a response to the Victorian Government's Mental Health Reform Strategy. To that end VAADA hosted a forum on 10 July 2008 with drug and alcohol service providers to discuss the consultation paper Because Mental Health Matters. Attendees at the forum agreed that the AOD sector needs to be heard in this process. Our discussion covered a range of issues including the need for integrated policy development; funding models that support partnerships and collaboration; and that the particular skills, knowledge and practice wisdom of the AOD sector needs to

be maintained and supported. VAADA is due to finalise our response by 31 July.

We thank all those AOD agencies who have provided input into these submissions and encourage all members to get involved in future policy discussions. Details of VAADA's recent submissions can be found at: <http://www.vaada.org.au>

### Letters from the Sector Poor Health & Crime Thrive

I wonder when Dole and Nysander introduced methadone in the 60's whether they realized how much controversy this treatment would create.

Here we are 40 years later and immersed in issues around pharmacy costs for dispensing G.P.'s embattled with prescribing in general practice settings and a Victorian system embroiled in a policy direction that creates barriers and is complicated by Commonwealth vs State responsibility.

Methadone has been one of the most rigorously researched and successfully proven treatment interventions for intravenous using clients trying to escape their addiction. Cost and health benefits are well established.

However we are currently faced with a system with burgeoning waiting lists, disillusioned G.P.'s, annoyed pharmacist, frustrated treatment agencies and clients without a reasonable response.

Policy and beurocracy has resulted in many clients in Victoria being caught up in a system which is clearly not working for them. Whilst this continues poor health and crime thrive.

G.P.'s are increasingly reluctant to get involved with pharmacotherapy prescribing without adequate support, mentoring and training in this specialist area.

The ongoing frustration for workers in the Alcohol and Drug field is that there are solutions but they require policy change, resources and commitment. It's simply not good enough!  
Geoff Soma WRAD Director

**VAADA is creating a new section within its newsletter (VAADA NEWS) which will provide a forum where readers can air their views on, or raise issues around Victorian AOD sector issues.**

**Letters should be no more than 150 words and include the name of the author and can be emailed to [cmcdonnell@vaada.org.au](mailto:cmcdonnell@vaada.org.au).**

**By submitting your letter for publication, you agree that we may edit the letter for space or legal reasons and may republish it on the VAADA website.**

DATE	EVENT
August 12 & September 11	<b>Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (introduction)</b> This workshop will provide an introduction to key human rights concepts, the operation of the Charter, remedies contained in the Charter, the functions of the Commission. When: Tuesday 12 August, 9.30am to 1.30pm, and Thursday 11 September, 9.30am to 1.30pm. Cost: \$45. For more information about later workshops, and to register, please visit the link below. All workshops are held at Level 3, 380 Lonsdale Street, Melbourne (between Elizabeth and Queen Streets). Contact: Jason Rostant 9281 7104 <a href="mailto:jason.rostant@veohrc.vic.gov.au">jason.rostant@veohrc.vic.gov.au</a>
August 28	<b>Acquired Brain Injury and Pregnancy</b> 9:30am – 12:30pm Venue: Conference room A. This session will focus on promoting an understanding of the implications during pregnancy of alcohol and substance related acquired brain injury. The session will: Provide an understanding of Acquired Brain Injury; Describe a screening tool for the identification of risk factors for Acquired Brain Injury; Discuss strategies for working with pregnant women with an Acquired Brain Injury, including managing challenging behaviors and complex needs. Bookings and contact details There is no charge for the program including training material. For bookings and enquires contact WADS Tel (03) 9344 3631 Fax (03) 9344 2719. Email <a href="mailto:wads@thewomens.org.au">wads@thewomens.org.au</a> . To cancel please call Tony as there is often a waiting list.
August 29	<b>Turning Point Seminar series 'Addiction is a brain disease: and it matters! Neurobiology and the treatment of addiction in the 21st century'</b> Professor Jon Currie, Professor/Director Addiction Medicine, St Vincent's Hospital, Melbourne at Turning Point on Friday 29th August 1.00pm – 2.00pm 142 Gertrude Street Fitzroy. Booking Required 8413 8413
September 1 to September 3	<b>INSIGHTS and SOLUTIONS: 2nd International Conference on Alcohol and Other Drug Related Brain Impairment and the Brain Injury Australia National Conference 2008</b> A key focus will be Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD). Want to know more? Visit <a href="http://www.arbias.org.au">www.arbias.org.au</a> or <a href="http://www.bia.net.au">www.bia.net.au</a> for information. Alternatively, email. <a href="mailto:events@adf.org.au">events@adf.org.au</a> or telephone. +61 (03) 9278 8137 to register your interest.
September 10	<b>From GO to WHOA Psychostimulant Training Course for Health Professionals</b> – The aim of the project is to assist health professionals such as medical practitioners, nurses, mental health workers and alcohol and drug workers to manage and treat users of psychostimulants (speed, base, ice, MDMA, cocaine). A series of one-day courses are being delivered covering the topics. An Overview of Psychostimulants; Pharmacology; Epidemiology and risks; Responding to psychostimulant use. Further information, course flyers and registration is available online at <a href="http://www.turningpoint.org.au">www.turningpoint.org.au</a> . Contact <a href="mailto:kieranc@turningpoint.org.au">kieranc@turningpoint.org.au</a> or (03) 8413 8704.
September 16	<b>Medically Supervised Injecting Centre Forum</b> VAADA & Yarra Drug & Health Forum, – An information session on the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross Sydney. The panel will comprise Dr Ingrid van Beek Founding Medical Director MSIC; Ms Colette McGrath, Clinical Services Manager MSIC; Superintendent Frank Hansen, Commander Drug & Alcohol Coordination, State Crime Command, NSW Police; Ms Linda Mearing, General Manager, Kings Cross Partnership Inc (the Business/Traders Association) and hopefully a Councillor from the Sydney City Council. <b>Where:</b> Richmond Town Hall Meeting Room 1, 1st Floor 333 Bridge Road, Richmond <b>When:</b> Tuesday 16th September, 12.30pm – 4.00pm. Cost: Free; Light Lunch Provided 12.30pm – 1.00pm (Please inform us if there are any dietary requirements other than Vegetarian). <b>Registration Essential</b> to Chris McDonnell (VAADA) email <a href="mailto:cmcdonnell@vaada.org.au">cmcdonnell@vaada.org.au</a> ph 9416 0899; Joe Morris (YDHF) email <a href="mailto:joe.morris@nych.org.au">joe.morris@nych.org.au</a> ph 94162459 or 0419 521 075. <b>RSVP</b> by 9th September to secure a place. Supported by the City of Yarra
September 25	<b>'One Shot' Workshop – Melbourne</b> 'One Shot' is a new resource produced by the Kirketon Road Centre (Ingrid van Beek Director) in Kings Cross, Sydney. 'One Shot' aims to explore the potential role that injecting drug users may have in the prevention of the transition to injecting among non-injectors. In situations where initiation does occur, these resources acknowledge the important peer role that current injectors play in messages around safe using. Come along and join us as we critically engage with the opportunities and challenges presented by the 'One Shot' DVD and the accompanying educators' Kit. Date: 25 September 2008 Time: 11am -3pm Place: Ground Floor, 215 Franklin St Melbourne. Cost: Free (but spaces are filling fast!) For information and registration email <a href="mailto:j.johnson@latrobe.edu.au">j.johnson@latrobe.edu.au</a>