

MEDIA RELEASE

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Drug testing welfare recipients a false positive

The Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) maintains grave concerns regarding the Federal Government's announcement today to pilot a program of drug testing 5000 welfare recipients.

This proposal does not have an evidence base and is likely to engender greater harm to the community.

These types of ill-considered measures, while popular among a number of cohorts, displace a highly complex drug using market and contributes to increasing stigmatisation toward individuals who consume illicit substances specifically as well as welfare recipients generally.

Media reports on this policy indicate that individuals who are provides two a positive drug tests over a 25 day period will be corralled into the already overburdened alcohol and other drug treatment.

Ms Sharon O'Reilly, acting EO of VAADA, states, 'the Victorian AOD treatment sector is already significantly overburdened and this policy will only increase the burden, through capturing individuals who use drugs but are not experiencing substance dependence. This limits access to those people who are in dire need for treatment and have been waiting, in some cases for months'.

Ms O'Reilly continues, ' we are receiving constant feedback from the community that they cannot access the treatment system; any endeavour to increase unnecessary demand will take up a place for someone with a legitimate AOD issue. Forcing someone into AOD treatment who is not experiencing dependency is not dissimilar to providing insulin to an individual who is not diabetic'.

There is also concern that this may generate a shift in consumption patterns among cohorts who consume illicit substances, to consuming substances which cannot be detected through standard drug testing means, such as new and emerging psychoactive substances or shifting onto various prescription drugs. This will likely create unknown harms and further complexities for our treatment services and emergency departments.

An additional perverse incentive is the possibility that individuals experiencing dependency may be reluctant to engage in treatment so as not to 'out' themselves as a person who uses illicit substances.

Ms O'Reilly continues, 'this policy may result in a number of unintended outcomes, such as creating a perverse incentive to engage in crime to procure substances, avoid treatment and engagement with various services to keep their substance use under the radar, which creates further harms for the individual and community as a whole.

VAADA is the peak body that represents over 80 Alcohol and other Drug services across Victoria. On a daily basis these services are dealing with the effects of harmful alcohol and other drug consumption.

For more information or to arrange an interview please contact Sharon O'Reilly on 0416027747 for comment or if unavailable, David Taylor on 0413 914 206.