

March 2017
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The degustation of reform



The ebb and flow of activity in the Victorian Alcohol and drug sector is never dull. The past few months have seen a considerable amount of activity related to our sector. Some of this work and representation undertaken by VAADA includes very important feedback on DHHS documentation on a new AOD 'Performance Management Framework', as well as draft 'Residential Rehabilitation guidelines', and feedback on the proposed devolution of the recently commissioned 'AOD Intake and Assessment System' which will devolve assessment back to agency level by 1 July 2017. To assist with this process the Department has established a number of different reference groups to advise on aspects of the Adult AOD Service Delivery system, as well to advise on a completely new project called the 'AOD Design, Service and Infrastructure Plan' which will also involve KPMG consulting. VAADA has been asked to participate on both these committees.

As if things have not been busy enough VAADA completed and distributed its State Budget Submission, held a very successful biennial AOD Sector State conference with over 400 people attending over 2 days, and responded to a plethora of inquiries and submissions beyond those already mentioned earlier, which included submissions to a federal 'NDIS review', another to the State Ombudsman on 'Post release access to AOD treatment', and a submission on the 'Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement Inquiry into Crystal Methamphetamine'.

The past few months have also seen the re-awakening of discussion and debate around the importance of establishing a 'Supervised injecting facility' (SIF) in Richmond as a means of reducing the considerable number of locality based deaths in that area. Arising out of a recent inquest into the death of a young woman

is a Coronial recommendation for the establishment of such a facility, and support for which has come from a range of sources including 48 agencies who signed a public advertisement in support of a SIF and various media outlets which ran a number of feature stories in favour. Related to this issue on 23 February 2017 the Minister for Mental Health, Martin Foley MP, announced that the Victorian Government will invest an additional \$1.3 million across the next 12 months to help to reduce drug related harm and fatal overdoses across Victoria. This funding will support a range of harm reduction measures, including: 'Increased access to Naloxone', 'Expanded outreach services through new post overdose response', and 'Expanded overdose prevention and education'.

While on the topic of new funding the 6 Victorian Primary Health Networks have commenced the long awaited distribution of Commonwealth funds announced in response to the National Ice Taskforce announcement in December 2015. These projects will over coming months take shape and it is hoped that they can and will make a contribution to the Victorian and National AOD landscape. VAADA will continue to seek input as best it can given the spread of PHNs and the variable understanding of the Victorian AOD sector.

In keeping with the PHN theme VAADA has recently seen the departure of Chantel Churchus who has joined the North Western Melbourne PHN, following another ex VAADA staff member Brad Pearce late last year. Chantel has worked at VAADA on two occasions, she has been a very strong contributor in the sector development arena with her writing and communication skills and recent network facilitating role. She will be sadly missed at VAADA by all her colleagues but we are sure her contribution will continue to shine through from the other side at NWPHN.

Sam Biondo
Executive Officer

VAADA 2017 conference

VAADA's 2017 conference entitled 'Complexity, Collaboration, Consumers & Care' was held at the Jasper Hotel in Melbourne from 16-17 February 2017. The conference theme reflected the significant changes and reforms rolling out throughout the community services landscape and the need for the AOD sector to adapt. The theme also reflected the need for us 'to do more with less' as well as the increasing complexity in systems, service delivery and presentations.

Complexity, Collaboration, Consumers & Care was VAADA's most well attended conference to date with over 405 delegates attending 98 different presentations over the two day period. The subject matter and content of these presentations was varied in nature and representative of the rich diversity which makes up Victoria's vibrant AOD sector.

The wide range of presenters included some eminent keynotes and was opened by the Hon Martin Foley, who reflected on some achievements to date as well as future endeavour. He reflected on service availability, partnerships, innovation, and diversity as well as shared values across the sector and government on AOD issues. He noted some of the challenges associated with the reforms in 2014 and noted the pending changes in Intake & Assessment and activity around data systems. While welcoming the debate ensuing from the Private Members Bill on Supervised Injecting, the Minister asserted that this government had no plans to implement such a facility.

Dr Cassandra Goldie, CEO, Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) made a number of insightful observations regarding poverty and inequality as well as constructively unpacking a number of contemporary political statements in a manner which illustrates the ways in which data can be misused. She highlighted the need to put human experience at the front of advocacy activity while acknowledging the risks associated with stigma evident within cohorts who engage in AOD services as well as other health and community services.

Trevor Pearce, Director of Education and Training, VACCHO, presented on a range of issues impacting upon Aboriginal communities in Victoria, identifying the current swathe of relevant activity at both a Commonwealth and state level. Mr Pearce indicated challenges in the tendering environment, creating difficulties for smaller services and noted a number of pertinent observations specific in working with Aboriginal communities.

Dr Vanessa Caldwell, national manager of Matua Raki (NZ), presented on a number of the challenges associated with advocacy, reflecting on that occurring within NZ on AOD issues. Dr Caldwell spoke specifically on system issues



Cassandra Goldie, CEO ACOSS



Martin Foley, Minister for Mental Health



Trevor Pearce, Director, Training and Education, VACCHO

including bottle necks and the need to ensure wait time data is comprehensible and accurate. Dr Caldwell also highlighted that service user acceptance of the 'system' is essential for the system to work.

Dr Fraser Todd, Consultant Psychiatrist, Senior Clinical Advisor for Te Pou and Matua Raki (NZ), highlighted the emphasis on wellbeing within Maori and Pasifika communities. He provided detailed commentary on systems reflecting on outcomes, wellbeing, integration and complexities. Dr Todd's reflections on NZ as well as expertise on systems was instructive on how to engage in system reform and what works. Pertinent to the complexity of AOD systems, he noted, 'for every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong'.

The Panel discussion, chaired by the irreverent Rod Quantock, consisted of Anne-Maree Rogers (EACH), Professor Dan Lubman (Turning Point), Dr Fraser Todd, Dr Vanessa Caldwell, Michal Morris (NWMPHN) and Jeff Gavin (APSU), provided a broad ranging array of views on contemporary issues afflicting the sector. The discussion ranged from the positives and negatives associated with the reform, evidence, advocacy, system design, consumer needs and public confidence. Rod, being an obliging chair, kept the discussion rolling and answered some of the tricky questions, asserting in one instance that Victoria should follow in the footsteps of Portugal with drug policy.

The wide range of presentations and workshops covered an array of content, including peer support, treatment models, harm reduction, dual diagnosis, consumers, Aboriginal matters, workforce, families, rural issues and many more. While we are still reviewing the evaluations, at first glance the feedback is generally positive with the VAADA conference a staple in major events related to the sector. We will reflect on the evaluations and ensure that they inform the planning for VAADA 2019.

We note that AOD Media Watch was also launched at the conference, which is supported by a number of prominent agencies and individuals and aims to provide a necessary resource to media and the community on public comment with AOD issues.

Aside from chairing the panel, Rod Quantock also provided entertainment at the conference dinner, which was well attended with good food and company. Rod's acerbic wit was a highlight and even those on the receiving end of his satire enjoyed the show...

We would like to express our gratitude to the various sponsors, delegates, presenters and keynotes who in combination made this a fantastic event.



Dr Vanessa Caldwell, National Manager of Matua Raki



Sam Biondo, EO, VAADA



(FL) Dan Lubman, Anne-Maree Rogers, Rod Quantock, Michal Morris, Jeff Gavin, Dr Vanessa Caldwell and Dr Fraser Todd

Family Violence Royal Commission – one year on

As we approach the anniversary into the release of the report and recommendations of the Royal Commission into Family Violence, it is timely to remind ourselves of the intersect between family violence and alcohol and other drugs (AOD). This highlights the importance of ensuring that the recommendations are implemented in full and that there is strong cross sector involvement and engagement in this process.

We note the following concerning data:

- Alcohol is involved in up to 65 percent of family violence incidents reported to the police
- 50 percent of all partner violence is alcohol related
- Illicit substances are involved in just over one third of all family violence incidents

- Illicit substance involvement in family violence has more than doubled in the past five years, experiencing a 120 percent increase over that time (alcohol involvement has increased by 70 percent over the same period)

The Victorian Government is currently considering the many submissions tendered for the Inquiry into the *Liquor Control Reform Act 1998*, an undertaking which was recommended in the Royal Commission. This provides a crucial opportunity for government to make strong inroads into reducing alcohol related family violence through implementing a range of evidence informed initiatives detailed by various health agencies.

Vic government announcements – naloxone and new drug laws

On National Family Drug Support Day, Minister Martin Foley announced \$1.3M package to subsidise the cost of naloxone to families and people who use drugs. Minister Foley also noted that the funding would provide capacity to follow up with individuals who have survived an overdose. This is a welcome announcement, but there are still some challenges with regard to the supply of naloxone which need to be addressed.

This program will operate in the same six regions as the Peer Based Workers Program.

Also, government has introduced laws seeking to ban the sale of all synthetic substances by banning any substance that has a psychoactive effect and increasing the fines for anyone selling these substances. Similar laws are currently operating in NSW and WA.

The government has also reduced the quantity of methamphetamine identified as commercially trafficable.

It is too early to tell how the 'market' will adapt to these changes, however based on past experience attempts at disrupting supply of various substances often results in perverse outcomes.

For further information on these announcements, see:

www.premier.vic.gov.au/saving-lives-preventing-and-treating-overdose/

www.premier.vic.gov.au/synthetic-drugs-banned-and-tough-new-ice-laws/

Launch of AOD Media Watch

The media plays an important role in the public debate regarding Alcohol and Other Drugs (AOD). There is a complex interaction between media reporting, drug policy and drug-related harm. AOD Media Watch is run by a group of researchers and clinicians who work in the field that aim to improve the reporting of AOD issues through putting the spotlight on stories that contain misinformation, perpetuate unnecessary moral panic and stigma.

Moral panics in the media can actually be detrimental by counter-intuitively leading to increased drug use since it increases the perception that more people are using the drug than actually are. It has also been found that moral panics reduce the degree to which some people believe that the drug being reported on is harmful and reduces the credibility of AOD information in the media.

Meanwhile, the use of certain language in the media perpetuates already entrenched stigma about people who use certain drugs. Such stigma not only limits access to healthcare services, but by internalising this stigma, people who use drugs are more likely to feel marginalised from society which can exacerbate their use of drugs and contribute to addiction.

Following the launch of AOD Media Watch at the VAADA conference on 16 February, we hope to engage with Australian media so that they appreciate how journalists can help reduce drug-related harms. To assist journalists in providing critical analysis of drug-related issues and events, that has the potential to help reduce harms from drug use, we have compiled a set of guidelines for journalists.

We hope that the public will help AOD Media Watch spot dodgy AOD coverage, or even work with the reference group to assist in deconstructing poor media coverage of AOD-related events. In doing so, we hope that media reporting of AOD issues in Australia becomes more objective, using science and evidence rather than perpetuating myths, opinions and moral panic. For more info, see:

www.aodmediawatch.com.au

www.facebook.com/AODMediaWatch/

@AODMediaWatch

Dr Steve Bright
Curtin University

Growing SIF advocacy

Over the past three months, there has been significant activity and advocacy in response to the dire situation occurring within a small area of North Richmond and Abbotsford, a region where over 20% of Victoria's fatal heroin overdoses have occurred or are immediately related to.

The issues with regard to public injecting, including a public concern regarding the proliferation of discarding injecting paraphernalia have been a consistent issue for the region.

In December 2016, a Coronial inquiry into a fatal overdose of an individual resulted in findings released in February that recommended that the 'Minister for Mental Health take the necessary steps to establish a safe injecting facility trial in North Richmond'. Also in February, a Bill was introduced into

the Victorian Legislative Council effectively calling for the 18 month trial of a supervised injecting facility in North Richmond; although the bill was not successful, the issue has been put to committee to report on by September 2017.

In early February, 48 agencies signed a public letter published in the Herald Sun calling for the piloting of a supervised injecting facility in North Richmond which was accompanied by extensive media coverage on this issue at that time.

Those 48 agencies represent a broad swathe of services with expertise on this issue and the letter highlighted the consensus among the experts on a key measure to reduce the increasing drug toll in Victoria.

Turning a blind eye to drug abuse gets us nowhere

SAM BIONDO

Last June, Victoria's chief health officer published a notice indicating a risk of hepatitis A contagion associated with a store in Victoria; on February 5, 2016, a warning was published on the same site indicating a link between pre-packaged salad and salmonella. These warnings were clearly issued to advise the public of potential risks and prevent or reduce associated harms.

This basic logic is applied selectively, however. Last week, Victoria Police defended its decision not to warn the public about what was in a toxic batch of drugs sold as MDMA, which resulted in three deaths. Tests revealed the drug was tainted with the powerful hallucinogen NBOMe. The police had circulated an internal memo detailing its knowledge of the dangerous cocktail.

The police argue it is inappropriate to issue warnings as dangerous

substances may be found "in other forms", implying that individuals may opt to use other substances under the false belief they pose a lower risk. This is nonsensical. There is a definite risk if someone consumes a substance that contains dangerous chemicals. There is only a possible risk if someone consumes a substance that may be very harmful or carries the standard risks associated with consuming pills.

If the health of the community is to be prioritised, the police should be guided by the need to reduce definite risk, rather than prioritising policy to tackle a possible risk.

The flawed logic demonstrates at best a commitment to obviate effective harm-reduction strategies. At worst, it's indicative of entrenched discrimination. This neglectful approach affects the health of about 500,000 Australians who, according to the National Drug Strategy Household Survey, have consumed ecstasy. It would appear

that as things stand, the police are not up for the task of informing the public about how to reduce harm from drugs, despite the police's Forensic Drug Branch receiving \$4.5 million from Victoria's Ice Action Plan. Perhaps the chief health officer should be authorised to procure this data in real time and issue warnings as appropriate.

This is not an isolated incident of neglect towards reducing the harm among drug-using cohorts. Currently, there is a debate (of sorts) on the implementation of a supervised injecting centre in North Richmond. A small area of North Richmond and Abbotsford has, for years, been the epicentre of fatal heroin overdoses, with at least 20 per cent of fatal heroin overdoses related to that area. But now, things have greatly worsened.

The contribution of illicit substances to overdose deaths increased by 38 per cent from 2014 to 2015, with heroin-related overdoses

increasing from 137 to 173 deaths in that period. The rate of ambulance callouts related to heroin in the City of Yarra has for a number of years been about 12 times the state average. Early indications suggest the increase in fatal heroin overdoses is the new normal and is the beginning of an enduring longer term trend of heroin overdoses (both fatal and non-fatal) in North Richmond.

The evidence of harm here is indisputable. The consensus among experts, supported by evidence indicating that supervised injecting facilities reduce fatal overdoses and other harms, is irrefutable. Yet, like so many effective harm-reduction measures that would help reduce the increasing toll - such as pill testing and issuing alerts on "bad batches" - supervised injecting centres have been repeatedly rejected, in many cases due to fatuous and factually inaccurate concerns.

Harm reduction is premised on the notion that many in the com-

munity will consume licit and illicit substances irrespective of any interventions, and therefore there is a need to reduce harm among these cohorts. A good example is the provision of sterile injecting equipment to intravenous drug users to reduce needle sharing and thus reduce the transmission of blood-borne viruses. Yet such measures are waning, with a reduction from 3.9 per cent (2002/03) to 2.1 per cent (2009/10) of the total spend nationally allocated to alcohol and other drug harm-reduction measures.

The bipartisan rejection of evidence is costing many lives. About one person dies every two days due to heroin overdose in Victoria. Three people died in January and 20 ended up in hospital. Families across the nation are devastated. Many of these deaths are preventable. Government needs to act.

Sam Biondo is executive officer of the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association.

The above article was published in *The Age* on 13 February 2017, as well as the theage.com.au news website.

Calendar

MARCH – APRIL 2017

Breakthrough: Ice education for families

Turning Point, SHARC, Bouverie Centre
Various regions in Victoria

Registration and further information: <https://www.breakthroughforfamilies.com/>

29 MARCH

1st anniversary of Hepatitis C DAA treatment: Victoria's achievements, opportunities and challenges

La Trobe University
Melbourne

Registration: <https://mpcn.secure.force.com/Events/daa-forum>

31 MARCH

Darknet drug trading

Turning Point
Fitzroy

Registration: <https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/talking-point-friday-31st-march-2017-tickets-32392702445>

26 APRIL

Celebrating Recovery Event 2017

EACH
Fernree Gully
Registration: ree.pritchard@each.com.au

29 APRIL

Hepatitis C in Drug and Alcohol Settings Education Program

Australian Society for HIV, Viral Hepatitis and Sexual Health Medicine
Parkville

Information and registration: <http://nidaconference.com.au/>

8-9 MAY

Complexities of working with AOD clients who have carried out family violence

Presented by: VAADA and No To Violence
Venue and registration: to be confirmed – WATCH THIS SPACE

26 MAY

Service Providers Conference

VAADA
Further details pending

The VAADA website now hosts an online calendar where events can be uploaded and sighted. To access this free online service, go to www.vaada.org.au/events

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