

Committee Secretary  
Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement  
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5 February 2020

Dear Secretary,

**RE: Inquiry into Public Communications Campaigns Targeting Drug and Substance Abuse**

VAADA welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee on Law Enforcement's (**Committee**) Inquiry into Public Communications Campaigns Targeting Drug and Substance Abuse (**Inquiry**). The pattern which is emerging from various studies on such communications campaigns is that they are typically expensive, ineffective, and, at worst, harmful. Evidence shows that increased stigma is a major consequence of these campaigns which reduces the likelihood that those in need of treatment will access it. To avoid investing taxpayer dollars in communications campaigns that do not meet their aims and place Australians at an increased risk of harm, VAADA suggests the government abandon its preference for fear-based campaigns in favour of evidence-based approaches.

**The Australian context**

Australia has made a considerable investment in advertising campaigns seeking to reduce drug use. In 2015, the Federal Government launched a \$9 million television advertising campaign designed to warn young people and their families of the dangers associated with using crystal methamphetamine, or 'ice' (**Ice Campaign**). At the same time, the Federal Government set aside \$20 million to spend on awareness campaigns focusing on ice over the following two years.<sup>1</sup>

There has also been notable investment in campaigns targeting drug use at the state level. For example, New South Wales' infamous 'Stoner Sloth' anti-cannabis campaign cost the NSW Government more than \$350,000 and absorbed 265 public servant work hours.<sup>2</sup> Despite the considerable outlay of public funds and human resources, the campaign produced no discernible impact on levels of cannabis use and was publicly derided.

Given the level of expenditure of such campaigns, it is imperative that the Committee carefully consider the efficacy and value of these campaigns and base their recommendations on evidence.

**Efficacy of public communication campaigns**

Evaluations of previous public communications campaigns, both Australian and international, have found that they rarely achieve any substantive change in either perceptions or levels of drug use. A group of

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<sup>1</sup> B Quinn and P Dietze, 'Awareness campaigns need to target the real victims of ice', The Conversation [website], 13 May 2015, <https://theconversation.com/awareness-campaigns-need-to-target-the-real-victims-of-ice-40631> accessed 4 February 2020.

<sup>2</sup> C Wahlquist, 'Stoner Sloth anti-drug ads' true cost to taxpayers revealed in FOI documents' The Guardian [website] 18 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2016/feb/18/it-is-baffling-stoner-sloth-anti-drug-ads-true-cost-to-taxpayers-revealed> accessed 5 February 2020.

Canadian drug policy experts undertook a comprehensive study (**Werb Study**) of anti-illicit drug campaigns in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom in 2011. The researchers evaluated the effectiveness of public communications campaigns (or public-service announcements) and found they had a limited impact on drug use.<sup>3</sup>

In the Australian context, the study examined Phase Two of the Australian Government's *National Drugs Campaign*, which targeted youth aged from 13 to 24. The Werb study found that, rather than having the intended outcome of preventing the use of drugs, the campaign failed to garner any significant change to existing rates of illicit drug use.<sup>4</sup>

Evaluation for impact and efficacy rarely feature in the design, planning and implementation of media campaigns: they are rarely evaluated and most existing research come from the United States.<sup>5</sup> In fact, a 2015 study by an international group of drug policy experts found that 'most mass-media interventions are *not* developed in compliance with ... classical ... public health...: designing interventions based on evidence and in evaluating their impact'.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, it is particularly important to note the findings of studies evaluating their efficacy. It is broadly among public health and drug experts accepted that these campaigns are limited in their efficacy, demonstrating the need for a long-overdue overhaul of current approaches.

### Stigma

Studies have shown communications campaigns are not just ineffective: they can also cause harm. A recent Australian study by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and Monash University found that anti-drug campaigns propagate the stigma surrounding drug use and those who use drugs as a way to deter others from using. The hyperbolic language in these campaigns, according to Australian drug researchers Brendan Quinn and Paul Dietze, 'has the potential to incite unnecessary fear and misinform the public'.<sup>7</sup>

An example of such advertising is the aforementioned Ice Campaign, which leveraged the stereotyped 'junkie' image to convey its message. The advertisement showed graphic depictions of people who use ice as violent, criminal and psychotic.<sup>8</sup>

The nature of broad public communications campaigns means that they reach a wider audience than just their intended demographic. For these people—people who currently use drugs, those who would most benefit from treatment—these kinds of messages can have a negative impact. A participant in the Lancaster Study who was using drugs at the time of their engagement, stated:

When you see the ads of some guy on meth in a hospital, smashing up stuff and punching - I don't think it's a good thing. No, people just go, 'Oh, rehabs going to be full of those people.' When I took it [ice], I just went out dancing and played ping pong all night. [...] I had a great time. I know it sounds - I shouldn't say that. No, no, but I didn't do anything absolutely crazy. [...] So, when you put ads out there saying that we're horrible people, yeah it's weird.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> D Werb et al, 'The effectiveness of anti-illicit-drug public-service announcements: a systematic review and meta-analysis', *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, vol 65, 2011, p. 837.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> C Douglass et al, "'Just not all ice users do that": investigating perceptions and potential harms of Australia's Ice Destroys Lives campaign in two studies', *Harm Reduction Journal*, vol 14, no 45, 2011, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> E Allara et al, 'Are mass-media campaigns effective in preventing drug use? A Cochrane systematic review and meta-analysis', *BMJ Open*, vol 5, 2015, p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> B Quinn and P Dietze, 'Awareness Campaigns'.

<sup>8</sup> C Douglass, "Just not all ice users do that", p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> K Lancaster, K Seear and A Ritter, 'Reducing stigma and discrimination for people experiencing problematic alcohol and other drug use', *DPMP Monograph No. 26*, April 2017, <https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/sites/default/files/ndarc/resources/Monograph%2026%20Drug%20Policy%20Modelling%20Program.pdf> p. 73.

This observation is indicative of the effect that negative portrayals may have on drug user's likelihood of accessing treatment. Rather than encouraging people to seek treatment, stigma may deter people from accessing it because doing so means taking on the stigmatized identity of a drug user.<sup>10</sup> This can lead to people hiding their drug use from their doctor, not seeking support, and, as a result, they may not receive the appropriate and necessary care that they require.

The use of stigma in communications campaigns is not effective, and can be counter-productive by proliferating the harms caused by drug use. VAADA urges the Committee to consider the devastating effects of stigma on drug users, their friends and family in their recommendations regarding future communications campaigns.

### **Recommendation**

To avoid further squandering taxpayer money on communications campaigns that achieve no positive returns for their considerable outlay, VAADA recommends that the Committee consider the findings of the Lancaster Report. The Lancaster Report recommended 'approaching mass media campaigns with extreme caution' and that a campaign targeting stigma be considered instead. Lancaster et al recommend that such a campaign should be 'evidence-based and developed in conjunction with drug user organisations'.<sup>11</sup> In addition, future campaigns must include an evaluation plan, which will enable their efficacy to be assessed.

If future communications campaigns are considered, it is imperative that a different approach be taken. Future campaigns should not reflect what is politically convenient for the government of the day but rather what evidence suggests will bring about positive outcomes and reduce the harms associated with substance use.

VAADA looks forward to the Committee's report following the conclusion of the Inquiry, and trust that the above matters are given due consideration. Should you have any questions regarding VAADA's submission, I may be reached on (03) 9412 5600 or via email at [sbiondo@vaada.org.au](mailto:sbiondo@vaada.org.au).

Sincerely,



Sam Biondo  
Executive Officer  
Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association

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<sup>10</sup> A Stevens et al, 'Depenalization, diversion and decriminalization: A realist review and programme theory of alternatives to criminalization for simple drug possession', European Journal of Criminology, 2019, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1477370819887514>

<sup>11</sup> Lancaster et al, 'Reducing Stigma', p. 105.