

MEDIA STATEMENT

30 August 2021

[starts]

International Overdose Awareness Day

The forgotten people: surging overdose toll in COVID-19 year

International Overdose Awareness Day gives us time to take stock of both how much we have achieved and how much more there is to do to prevent fatal overdose.

International Overdose Awareness Day allows us to collectively remember those who have died from overdose and acknowledge the experiences and strength of impacted families and friends.

Mr Sam Biondo, EO VAADA, says, 'in 2020, with Victorians spending much of the year under restrictions, we saw the number of fatal overdoses increase by 10 to 526 deaths. This is the second highest toll since the Coroners Court has been releasing this data.'

'On an international level, Victoria' the rate of fatal overdose in Victoria is unacceptably high – 8 per 100,000 head of population, more than doubling London, which is 3.31 per 100,000 head of population¹.

'Over the past decade, 4551 people have fatally overdosed in Victoria, with pharmaceuticals contributing to over three quarters of these overdoses. Benzodiazepines contributed to over half of all overdoses, as did illicit drugs. Alcohol contributed to three in ten overdoses'.

'Benzodiazepines, which have remained a strong contributor despite reforms such as Safescript, have otherwise been largely neglected. The recommendations from a largely forgotten [2007 Victorian Parliamentary report](#) would make good headway in reducing the harms associated with this substance.

'Those recommendations have gathered dust as Victorians have died.'

'We have seen the Victorian Coroners Court speaking for many families impacted by overdose in recent times, with recommendations for drug checking services, reform on synthetic cannabis an overhaul in post release prison support and previously supervised injecting and real time prescription monitoring systems.'

Alcohol contributions to fatal overdose have almost doubled from 80 in 2012 to 154 in 2020.

'Victorian treatment agencies have been reporting to VAADA that since COVID-19, alcohol related presentations have been both more frequent and more severe. It is important to remember, on this day particularly, that the bumper earnings for big alcohol through take away liquor outlets and home delivery during COVID-19 has created high demand for treatment, particularly among people who have not previously engaged in treatment. The spiraling overdose numbers illustrate the human cost of the alcohol industry's profits.'

¹ https://www.nhsapa.org/post/latest-drug-related-deaths-2021?utm_campaign=eebad045-c161-43cf-a520-4b590b12ab91&utm_source=so&utm_medium=mail&cid=e2eb7cbf-f1b5-4c63-b63b-95b0f3edb59b

'Governments need to start listening to the experts and families who have lost loved ones. We need to address the drivers of stigma, which we know stops people asking for help. We need to prioritise evidence informed policy, rather than popular policy.'

Last year, we listed eight reforms which can reduce fatal overdose:

1. **A National Overdose Prevention Strategy**
2. **Increased funding for drug treatment services, especially in rural and regional areas**
3. **A national drug testing and early warning system (as recommended by the Victorian Coroner's Court)**
4. **A minimum unit price for alcohol in Australia**
5. **Drug law reform**
6. **More funding for harm reduction**
7. **Accessible treatments for opioid dependence, including emerging formulas such as long-acting buprenorphine and hydromorphone**
8. **Require addiction medicine specialists to be posted at all major hospitals.**

Media stories on alcohol and other drugs may be traumatic for some people. Support is available and we ask that media agencies consider publishing the details below:

If this story has raised issues about your own or others drug and alcohol use, please contact Directline for confidential counselling and referral on 1800 888 236

[ends]

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 Sam Biondo on 0414 974 121 for comment or if unavailable, David Taylor on 0413 914 206.