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NEW RESPONSE TO DRUGS IS NEEDED



JOHN RYAN

WHAT better measure of how successful our approach to drugs is there than counting the number of people who die accidentally as a result of a drug overdose?

It's a grim task that Penington Institute has completed for a second year as part of our International Overdose Awareness Day campaign.

Through our taxes we spend millions of dollars on drug control and yet the death toll keeps rising. Clearly, something isn't working.

When laid out, the evidence is damning of our failed approach to drugs in Australia.

Our report — Australia's Annual Overdose Report 2017 — shows that more than twice as many Australians are dying due to accidental overdose compared with those dying from car accidents.

A significant increase in these deaths is from pharmaceutical opioids, heroin and highly potent fentanyl. Australia is continuing to see a sustained and unacceptable level of overdose — it is time more was done to ensure the community is aware about the dangers of drug overdose.

Many Australians don't acknowledge they are consumers of illicit drugs or are consuming

pharmaceutical drugs inappropriately. The stigma surrounding drugs means that it is difficult to have a sensible discussion about drug use in Australia. Shame, for people who are experiencing problems, is also one of the barriers stopping them getting help.

A health approach to this crisis is sorely needed. A health approach that is focused on early intervention, supporting people before their drug use escalates, and before addiction leads to crime.

Prohibitive costs to treatment, insecure housing, limited availability of support services and a punitive approach push people further into a cycle of crime and poverty. We need to do more to give these people the chance to recover.

A renewed effort to tackle Australia's drug problem will effectively address associated criminal activity and the needless loss of so many lives. The "war on drugs" approach is failing to stop people from overdosing. We need

to shift to a health-focused approach — this isn't going soft on drugs, it's getting smart on drugs.

There are great gains to be had if we make targeted investments in a health-led approach to this crisis.

The renewed call to establish a trial injecting centre in Richmond is the latest in a long line of compassionate and sensible public health proposals to better tackle this problem.

The namesake of the organisation I lead, Professor David Penington, first suggested this initiative in the 1990s; it is long overdue

Establishing facilities of this kind allows treatment services to

engage with people in the crisis of addiction.

The modestly funded Needle and Syringe Program is an example of a highly effective health-centred approach.

It has done an effective job of protecting the community from bloodborne viruses such as hepatitis C and HIV. You only have to look at the United States to see damage has been caused by not having a comprehensive NSP program such as ours.

In Australia we have a range of opioid substitution treatments that effectively act to stabilise people addicted to opioids so they can plan their recovery.

Absurdly, we make people pay a daily fee every time they go to the chemist to get their dose — often more costly than the drugs they are trying to escape.

So the question to ask is: Why would people trapped in crisis-level addiction want to move over to treatment? We need to make treatment an attractive option.

When people are addicted their ability to make choices in their best interest is often severely diminished. Driven by their addiction, individuals often become trapped in a cycle of crime and poverty.

One of the easiest things we could do is make opioid replacement therapy more accessible by removing the cruel dispensing fee.

The impact of doing this would be many people taking control of their addiction and a big reduction in drug dealing and the other crimes that



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people commit to afford drugs.

Reducing barriers around medical treatment is one simple measure that will provide people addicted to drugs with better pathways out of a cycle of criminal activity and incarceration.

This is not only a compassionate response, it is one that will actively work towards reducing the harm caused by drugs in our community — and a reduction in crime is a win for the whole community

A renewed effort to tackle Australia’s drug problem will effectively prevent associated criminal activity and the needless loss of so many lives.

Increasing punitive approaches to drug use is simply a matter of “more of the same”, with the unrealistic expectation of improved community outcomes.

As we mark International Overdose Awareness Day today, it’s time for a new approach.

JOHN RYAN IS CEO OF PENINGTON INSTITUTE





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