

Media Release

2 December 2019

DECRIMINALISATION NEEDED NOT DISCRIMINATION

Directions Health Services has today released a position paper highlighting the positive impact removing criminal penalties and sanctions for offences involving use and possession of small amounts of illicit drugs for personal use will have on an individual's health and welfare and the community more broadly.

"All the evidence tells us that criminal penalties do not reduce drug use," Directions Health CEO, Bronwyn Hendry said. "Yet, two-thirds of Commonwealth Government drug strategy funding is spent on law enforcement"

The position paper calls for decriminalisation of personal illicit drug use, which will reduce stigma and result in more people seeking treatment.

"Currently only a small portion of people with problematic drug use, receive the assistance they need," Ms Hendry revealed.

"Early intervention and diversion into treatment, rather than the justice system, saves taxpayer dollars by reducing criminal recidivism; improving health, wellbeing and life outcomes; significantly reducing costs associated with the judicial process and incarceration; and reducing participants' future reliance on welfare and service supports.

"The current system is not working to reduce drug use or keep the community safer."

Directions Health argues that decriminalisation is a harm minimisation strategy that has been shown to be much more effective than the current prioritisation of criminal penalties.

Patron of Directions Health Services, retired Justice Richard Refshauge has been a long-term advocate for development of harm minimisation policies. "I have seen firsthand the harms criminal penalties inflict. The personal, family and community costs are high. Having a criminal conviction can prevent a person securing employment, cause relationship breakdowns, and even lead to poverty and homelessness."

"Civil or administrative sanctions, such as a fine or other conditions, may still be imposed, and any illicit drugs found by police confiscated," Ms Hendry explained. "Importantly, the person would not have a criminal record simply for personal use or possession of small quantities of illegal substances that will impact their ability to gain employment or participate in other community activities. Manufacturing and sale of illicit substances would remain a criminal offence."

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Legalisation differs from decriminalisation in that it also includes regulation of production and supply of legalised substances, in addition to removal of criminal penalties for use and personal possession, as is the case with tobacco and alcohol.

“Directions Health is not proposing legalisation. Rather, we are proposing a health-first approach to personal drug use”, Ms Hendry said.

“Australia has the highest rate of policing drug use in the world. In the last 12 months, 81 per cent of drug offences were for personal use, not supply. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other disadvantaged populations are disproportionately represented.

“We need to change the way in which drug use and drug dependence is viewed and shift away from a criminal approach to a health-first approach. Australia needs to introduce a holistic, harm-minimisation based approach in order to have a chance at decreasing our high rates of incarceration and overdose deaths.”

A full copy of the Decriminalisation to Reduce Harm and Positively Impact on Drug Use Position Paper is available at www.directionshealth.com

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