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ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO REDUCING ILLICIT DRUG USE AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE COMMUNITY

SUBMISSION FROM KOLE WITTORFF

To the Committee,

I would like to take the opportunity to provide a written submission for the reduction in illicit drug use and the effects on the Australian community. I am not an expert in the health field but an informed citizen who is currently studying addiction. I would like to offer my thoughts and opinions on the topic since harm minimisation is a topic we covered in our university lecture.

A couple of key terms will be defined to help better understand the context of this submission. Currently in Australian society there are many drugs that are written into law as illegal and therefore considered illicit drugs. Decriminalisation means the drug is still illegal but a person who is caught with possession of the illicit drug is not charged for a criminal offence. The person is charged with possession but receives a monetary fine instead of being convicted in a Court. Supply and distribution of an illicit substance is still a criminal offence. Only possession of a drug is decriminalised. Regulation means the drug is legally monitored and subject to quality control measures. The purchase of a regulated drug is legal as well as possession for personal use only. Supply and distribution of a regulated drug is legal, creating legitimate business opportunities which are also regulated.

Decriminalisation is a popular alternative to help reduce illicit drug use and reducing the harm to a community caused by illicit drug use. It first needs to be mentioned that drug use is complex and people use drugs for a variety of reasons. Most people use a drug to alter or enhance their mood, thoughts, emotions and behaviour. Most people use drugs in a controlled and responsible manner.

Portugal has been successful in reducing the illicit drug problem the country was exposed to. Portugal decriminalised drug use and possession of all illicit drugs. People caught with possessing over the legal limit for possession of drugs are given the option to go to a public health centre to receive treatment for their drug use. A person can decline the treatment but if they are caught a second time they are mandated for treatment. Any monetary fines that are issued the money goes to their equivalent of the Department of Health and Welfare. This distribution of money funds the community health programs that help reduce the harms from dysfunctional or harmful drug use. Click on the link for the short episode produced by SBS The Feed program for a better understanding.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/the-feed/portugal-s-drug-laws-decriminalisation-in-action>

Holland also decriminalised some drugs the most well-known is cannabis. Holland has a de-facto decriminalisation of cannabis. Basically the Police do not enforce the possession or supply of cannabis. Cannabis and other natural drugs (Magic mushrooms) can be purchased from businesses and personal use is allowed. I have personally visited Holland and I noticed the culture is accepting of cannabis and mushroom use. This is different to Australia because people generally see anything illegal as criminal and unacceptable behaviour.

Australia has prohibited a lot of drugs. Heroin was actually found in many cough syrups and health stores until 1960. Due to racist sentiment towards the Chinese migrants and immigrants, along with the supposedly horror stories of opium dens, all forms of opiates were made illegal. This was meant to deter Chinese people coming to Australia and another form of oppressing people. People in Australia caught with any illicit drug are charged with a criminal offence. They appear in a Court and convicted. The Magistrate may give a Court Order to the person forcing them to attend a drug health centre or rehabilitation program. The convicted felon will also find it difficult to work and has the title of criminal attached to their person. This stigma can make a person isolated and turn to drug use to relieve the negative feelings associated with being a criminal. The act of using an illicit drug is no different than

using alcohol or tobacco. The real difference is the criminal record and association that goes with an illicit substance. A major concern is the distribution of funds. The Portuguese model works well because the money from the fines goes back into the health system. I feel that in Australia it is highly likely that such funding will get redistributed to other areas and not the health system, thus making the system unreliable and possibly fail.

Decriminalisation is a better way forward for individuals and their families but drugs are still prohibited. Prohibition still creates a black market for supply and distribution which creates further problems. Many drugs in the black market are adulterated, meaning they are bulked up with other substances or chemicals which are poisonous to the drug user and do cause physical harm. Bulking of a drug substance is to create better profit margins and to extend the use of the substance. One consideration would be to create an industry for and regulate certain drugs.

Tobacco and alcohol are a regulated drug industry, along with pharmaceuticals and medicines. This allows for quality control for the purity and safer levels of a substance, and to offer safe supply and distribution for a drug. Pharmaceutical grade Heroin for example has no physical health effects on the human body when taken in small regular doses. The drug alcohol however does cause harm. In fact alcohol causes more health problems to a person's body than heroin. Tobacco is very harmful not because of nicotine, but because of the chemicals used to enhance the product. Yes nicotine is addictive but the harms from it are less than the other chemicals found in cigarettes.

One possible solution would be to regulate the natural drugs such as tobacco, alcohol, cannabis and magic mushrooms. It could be designed that a business would need a licence to sell the product in its natural form. A person that purchases the product would do so only for personal use. It could be grown at home, and made or refined at home. Anyone caught purchasing a regulated drug product and selling it without a licence can be charged with illegal supply and distribution. This would help to discourage

criminal behaviour that undermines a legitimate business. With any business or industry in Australia they pay taxes and the same would be for a regulated drug industry generating income for the country.

Cannabis has many uses. Apart from drying the leaves to be smoked, cannabis can also be used for medicinal purposes with pain relief, the stem of the plant can produce hemp fibres which are suitable for manufacturing clothes. This creates lightweight but durable clothing. Cannabis has also been used to make environmentally sustainable housing. It is good at providing insulation better than other products and hemp is a fire retardant which is very useful in housing construction. By regulating this drug a variety of other industries will be created.

Heroin is processed from morphine which comes from a regulated poppy farming industry. Heroin could be added to the list of medicines manufactured by pharmaceutical companies. This would allow quality control measures to be in place for drug users. Heroin could be prescribed by Doctors or health care workers who are treating the drug user with their addiction. This will limit the availability of heroin and can be used with other pharmacological treatment programs involving methadone. This will ensure the harm from being dependant on heroin would be reduced in a safe and controlled manner that is monitored by professionals. Alternatively high quality Heroin could be sold legally in the right amount for people to use recreationally from pharmacies or chemists. It would be no different to people purchasing alcohol or tobacco, both of which can be bought legally and for as much as a person can afford.

A simple and effective solution is pill testing. This helps to inform the drug user about what is in the product they purchased. By giving a drug user accurate information about the drug they can decide whether to use it or not. This is more likely to be an acceptable solution than the proposed regulation or decriminalisation. Pill testing can only do so much to reduce harm. If people are informed about what substance they are actually using, even if they are told the risk, they will still use it. Pill testing only offers an individual to make a more informed decision.

Drugs will always be a controversial issue in Australian society. This is caused by people viewing drug use from a moral not a factual perspective. It would be immoral for any government to lawfully dictate what people should and should not do with their life. If people choose to use drugs a better solution would be to offer safer, lower risk alternatives. I hope I have offered some possible alternatives in reducing illicit drug use.

Yours truly,

Kole Wittorff