

Legislative Council of Western Australia
Select Committee Inquiry into Alternate Approaches to Reducing Illicit Drug
Use and its Effects on the Community



Submission from Rev George Davies, BScAgr BD DipEd

Summary

- I write as a youth worker of 50 years experience with cannabis related issues. I was a co-founder of Palmerston Association TC in WA in 1982 and shared house for years with drug-using young people at risk.
 - The discussion about health effects of cannabis for many comes to: "it is unhealthy, at least for some or many, therefore prohibit". This is desperately simplistic in my experience. The acute dangers of alcohol and cigarettes are well documented but we don't prohibit. To argue the opposite with cannabis to me is a serious myopia regarding ineffectiveness and the damage of the blackmarket.
 - Prohibition gets in the way of education when to admit usage means suspension from school.
 - Blackmarket means impurities and the unknown risks of synthetic cannabis. It means manipulation and substitution when "droughts" mean your supplier/supermarket offers worse substances.
 - High risk street present young people know that cannabis is used by lawyers, doctors, police, business people, politicians, teachers and more, but rarely do they get busted. The "message" is a deep seated cynicism and resentment.
 - Three young people asked me to attend the two and a half hour bust, on suspicion alone, by six police officers who were really excited to discover a bong in a waste paper bin. The next day the poem written by "Billy" on the wall of the nearby youth centre ended with: "Crave death's eternal embrace to ease the pain". His suicidal ideation had been intensified.
 - If a person is using a drug in moderation, with control, education is valuable but prohibition impairs that education and adds damage to usage.
 - If a person is using a drug because of stress and alienation, prohibition is clumsy and counter-productive.
 - The idea that someone should "take responsibility" for their actions comprehensively ignores the external factors which influence us.
 - The Australia 21 Roundtable Reports of 2012 and later require serious reading by the Australian population.
- We know the business lobby power regarding alcohol issues. The level of finance and corruption with illicit drugs means it is naive not to suspect some sources of public anti-drug "crusading" and political lobby to be undertaken by those who don't want a lucrative industry dismantled.
- The above examples relating to cannabis apply to the wide range of drugs with less damage than alcohol.

Introduction

I have been in close relationship with different sub-cultures, groupings and individuals using illicit drugs for over 50 years. This began through my practice of detached youthwork from the sixties in Sydney and regional NSW as a minister of the Methodist Church. Detached work emphasises the importance of relationship which are established and maintained in 'natural settings'. Thirty years of this time has included. the sharing of my own home for years with drug-using young people at risk.

In my State Youth Worker role with the Uniting Church in WA since 1977 I was a co-founder of Palmerston Association, including its Therapeutic Community at Wellard, co-founder of the WA Network of Alcohol and Other Drug Agencies, the Perth Inner City Youth Service with drop-in, streetwork and accommodation services, co-founder of the Youth Affairs Council of WA and also of regional youth services. A wide range of music, camping and other activities has included extensive involvement with Aboriginal communities in both NSW and WA.

I have presented workshops on drug and related issues at state, national and international conferences. A main focus of my work has been to discern the individual and sociological factors driving use and misuse of various drugs and the efficacy and outcomes of various enforcement and educational strategies associated with prohibition of illicit drugs. Whilst there is a great deal of attention to the effects of various drugs, there is a deficiency in attention to the factors driving the use and misuse of those drugs. Similarly, I submit, there is a great deal of attention to the damage caused by various drugs but a deficiency of attention to the damage caused by the prohibition of those drugs.

The insights I have gained resonate with the findings of key national and international bodies and research outlined in the following material.

Key International Findings

1. The Global Commission on Drugs

The Global Commission on Drugs, based in Geneva, is a high level commission which includes a wide range of former presidents and other high level personnel from across Africa, Latin America and the West.

In 2011 the GCD issued a report stating that: "The 40-year "War on Drugs" has failed, with devastating consequences for individuals and societies around the world." It urged all countries to look at the issue anew.

2. Australia 21 Roundtables

Australia21 is an independent, not-for-profit think tank established in 2001. Its Directors include Mr Mick Palmer AO APM, former Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police (AFP).

In response to the Global Commission report, Australia21, in January 2012, convened a meeting of 24 former senior Australian politicians and experts on drug policy, to explore the principles and recommendations that were enunciated by the Global Commission. The Australian group agreed with the Global Commission that the international and Australian prohibition of the use of certain "illicit" drugs has failed comprehensively. They argued that prohibition has been a failure in reducing supply and adds damage especially in terms of impurity of production.

In July 2012 A21 convened a second Roundtable and released a report addressing alternatives to prohibition, based on recognising drug use as a health and social issue.

In September 2015, Australia21 held a third Roundtable on drug laws, with law and law enforcement experts. The ground-breaking report from the Roundtable was released in March 2017, with a call for an end to criminal penalties for personal use and possession and a new focus on addressing the health and social issues associated with drug-taking.

In summary, A21 has tabled local and international evidence to show that punishing people is not an effective way to reduce drug use and that criminal prosecution can actually increase drug use and crime, as well as poverty, social disadvantage, unemployment, homelessness, family violence, child protection interventions, mental illness, stigma, discrimination and suicide.

3. NDRI - Norman Stamper

A few years ago the National Drug Research Institute, Curtin, invited Norman Stamper to present a seminar. Stamper is an American former chief of police and writer, known for his role as Chief of the Seattle Police Department (1994-2000). Since his resignation, Stamper has called for the legalization of all drugs.

At the NDRI seminar Stamper gave a vivid description of the level of cartel crime in Mexico where he used to holiday as a child with his dad, but now would not visit without a bodyguard.

4. Johann Hari

Johann Hari's book 'Chasing the Scream – The First and Last Days of the War on Drugs', constitutes a significant piece of social research on illicit drug issues. A British journalist, his political research and international interviews trace original documentation from the days of Harry Anslinger and alcohol prohibition in the USA to the present.

Looking internationally, Hari explores the drug problem and alternatives to the current situations of criminalising the users and handing over production and distribution to heavily armed cartels.

Hari approaches the contentious issue of movement from decriminalisation to legalisation with controls with an open mind. His findings are that legalisation results in a small increase in usage but a major reduction in damage.

5. President Nixon and the “War on Drugs”

OpEdNews on 24.03.2016 tabled a report from Dan Baum, a senior American journalist writing in support of drug legalization at Harper's Magazine. The report was tabled [Nixon Policy Advisor Admits He Invented War On Drugs to Suppress 'Anti-War Left and Black People'](#).

Baum set out a frank 1994 quote from former Nixon policy advisor John Ehrlichman, where Ehrlichman makes it clear there was no moral reason for the war on drugs. Baum writes:

“At the time, I was writing a book about the politics of drug prohibition. I started to ask Ehrlichman a series of earnest, wonky questions that he impatiently waved away. “You want to know what this was really all about?” he asked with the bluntness of a man who, after public disgrace and a stretch in federal prison, had little left to protect. “The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did.” I must have looked shocked. Ehrlichman just shrugged. Then he looked at his watch, handed me a signed copy of his steamy spy novel, *The Company*, and led me to the door.”

I suggest the “War on Drugs” terminology is disruptive to clear thinking about the issue to the same level that the action of Richard Nixon was unethical. Such slogans need to be understood by the public as desperately superficial and a trivialisation of the issues.

Consequences of Prohibition - Local Data

At the YACWA State Conference of 2014 I presented a workshop looking at the Australian and WA situations in comparison to the Australia21 Roundtables. The following areas outlined received endorsement from the workshop participants. In summary, for example, the counter-productive effects of the black-market in relation to cannabis legislation include ineffective education, fluctuating drug strength, impurities, corruption, gateway enhancement and potential for deepened alienation and suicidal ideation through the process of the "bust".

1. Black-market

Market share: It is clear that current "war" strategies are having little effect. Huge police busts of shiploads and container supplies of drugs provide increased market share for rival organisations and cartels. A temporary lull in supply is followed by a resumption of availability.

Impurity: Police frequently warn that consumers may be getting something different from their assumption, especially in festival settings. Where a consistent dealer is used, consumers still find the purity and concentration is uncertain. A substance may be 'cut' with a variety of foreign ingredients for bulk, or dangerous ingredients resulting from poor production such as in home-bake or designer synthetic drugs.

Manipulation: A 'taps on, taps off' can be used by suppliers to arrange a temporary shortage of cannabis, for example, where the dealer offers an alternative of something stronger, such as acid.

Gateway: The suggestion that cannabis, for example, is a 'gateway' drug, fails to understand that illicit cannabis will be more of a gateway than licit cannabis. Where a dealer is involved the person is often a supermarket, offering a variety of alternatives enhanced by 'taps on taps off'.

Crime: The finance involved in the black-market has a consequence at both upper and lower levels. The street level persons may need to commit petty or more serious crime to support their usage or debts. For the high level suppliers and organisers, the finance involved is immense and competition may involve violent measures. Cartel rivalry and warfare is not restricted to Mexico.

2. Corruption

There has been a litany of corruption examples relating to drugs over recent years. Australian examples include a Queensland Police Commissioner, Terry Lewis, and questions asked of Premier Joh Bjelke-Pedersen who, while accusing his opponents of being "soft on drugs", was himself being soft on the black-market. In NSW corruption implicated Premier Robert Askin, a Deputy Commissioner and senior lawyers. In South Australia the head of the Drug Squad and Operation Noah, Det. Sgt Barry Moyse, was implicated in trafficking networks. The Hoser files in Victoria have outlined a significant cultural corruption amongst police and lawyers.

It would be simplistic to argue that WA somehow avoids the dangerous mix of power and finance. I have personal experience where I conducted the funeral of a person I knew well and who had indicated that a proportion of his home lab profits went to a senior police officer. After his death an unpleasant person took possession of his house and caused serious family tensions. I gave the drug squad the address of the house and was concerned that after some time the police had taken no action. A drug squad member informed me they had referred the matter to local police. Such examples are by no means isolated in feedback I have received over time.

3. Public opinion manipulation

The political realities need appraisal in debates about prohibition. It is clear that very large sums of money are involved globally and the influence of cartels and organisations is extensive. These groups know that their large industry depends on the maintenance of prohibition. They know that public opinion is a key factor in decisions at the political level. No matter what vast array of informative data politicians have, unless there is bipartisanship on an issue, political necessities can require that a policy accede to the views of the voting public, if politicians wish to remain in office. The philosophy of Plato, that leaders should be educators, can be difficult to sustain.

Cartel managers are intelligent and would be aware of the public opinion and political domain. Given the level of finance and corruption with illicit drugs means it is naive not to suspect some sources of public anti-drug "crusading" and political lobby may be undertaken by those who don't want a lucrative industry dismantled. It follows that astute cartel operators could be behind some of the letters to editors which deplore the "damage" a from illicit drugs and the need to care for "our youth". Many letters to editors which focus on the damage from illicit drugs seem remarkably silent about addressing the damage which is added by prohibition.

In 2014 the Uniting Church Synod in WA passed a resolution affirming the appropriateness of medicinal cannabis. The Uniting Church received a letter from Heads of other denominations and other religions decrying the resolution of the Synod. The letter was accompanied by a 100 page paper from Drug Free Australia paper entitled "Beyond the Smoke – Screen - Examining Proposals for Legalisation of Marijuana as Medicine", which had been submitted to the Victorian-Tasmanian government inquiry. As a member of the UC Social Justice Commission, I was asked to assess the DFA paper to resource a possible response.

The DFA paper contained a heavy focus on varieties of harm from both medical or recreational cannabis in an endorsement of the theme that "there is harm therefore prohibit". This of course is simplistic given the history of alcohol prohibition and the clear damage from legal tobacco, as well as the significant side-effects of opioid and other prescriptions. The factor which stood out sharply, in my examination of the DFA paper, was that there was no recognition of, or reference to, the varieties of harm which accrue from prohibition. There was no attempt to undertake some assessment of balance of damage in proposing their case. It was totally one-sided and myopic.

To my mind it is not beyond the strategy of cartel shrewdness, that an organisation such as this could be a front, or influenced to be a front, for the maintenance of the status quo with prohibition and therefore the maintenance of a major industry in illicit trade. If we go beyond naivety it follows that the DFA opens itself to this possibility, as do other groups demonstrating a similar level of myopia.

4. Education

I delivered a workshop at the 1988 National Drug Education Workshop, which I attended as a representative of WANADA. I made the following points:

- There is a great deal of rhetoric in the drug field about the importance of education about drugs, with a particular role in the school setting.
- It is important, and generally given little attention, to address the impact of prohibition on education.
- As a former teacher it was clear, in Diploma in Education training, that Education 101 means to "start where people are at". We don't begin a discussion of diffusion and osmosis in plants with those who have not begun an elementary course in physics or biology.

- Suppose a drug educator says to his class: “Where are we at in our understanding of drugs?” A young person responds: “Well I smoke a bit of marihuana and drink a bit of VO Port and I’m wondering if it is a bad thing to combine those two?” The teacher, in the policy of many schools, may be duty bound to report the illicit drug usage of a student with associated consequences for the student. If the teacher does not do so, he or she may well be reported by another student as having condoned or ignored the behaviour.
- The general pattern is that students are unlikely to be honest about their own drug behaviour. They are also unlikely to hear about the positive benefits that some usage may have. (This was certainly the case with the presenter from the Office of the Chief Psychiatrist at a recent WANADA conference.) The result is that drug educators are effective for those least at risk. For others they are seen often as patronising and their credibility is diminished. The young person is therefore more likely to listen to peers, to the street or to their dealer.
- In other words, prohibition gets in the way of effective education, especially for those who need it most.
- In researching the drug education curricula of various States of Australia I found no syllabus which included some understanding of the origin of laws, such as the significance of Harry Anslinger in the USA alcohol prohibition era. For senior young people, some of whom will go on to Rotary, politics and other areas of significance, it is a pity that education is so deficient in this crucial area.

5. State budgets

Major policing, prison and court costs are associated with a “war” which is extensively recognised as “lost”. The “war” strategy is failing in areas of supply and usage, but also in the negative impact on the lives of persons whose causal factors for behaviour are not reached by arrest and imprisonment.

These realities are of course behind the long standing and widespread recognition of need for a paradigm shift, that problematic drug usage be seen as reflecting health and social issues rather than criminality. This approach is also termed justice reinvestment, with positive results across the world.

6. Impact on young people - Summary

Negative consequences from the harms added by prohibition are particularly significant for young people and young adults, given their stage of personal and social development.

AODCA

The Alcohol and Other Drug Council of Australia some years ago summed up broad national experience in the statement: “Incarceration and a criminal record do more harm than the bio-medical harm from use of the drug”

Youth agency policies

Many youth accommodation agencies feel constrained to address illicit drug use, where discovered, by eviction. Of course, the significant question which follows such action is “where to?”

School policies

School policies which suspend or dismiss students for illicit drug use are likely of course to deepen dysfunctional causal issues. Deterrents require a rational mindset, viz: ‘If I do x, y will happen’. A person in stress or expressing alienation is unlikely to respond in such a manner.

The alternative economy

An extensive culture exists amongst disenfranchised, street present, homeless young people who, without an accommodation address, do not have a bank account and do

not connect with Centrelink. Their survival is made up of varieties of petty theft, rifling cars, 'snowdropping' (items off clothes line), drug trading and for some, selling their own bodies in street or parlour prostitution.

Police crusades

Police have made frequent claims of success in street level household raids, particularly in south metropolitan areas and south-west of the state. Claims are made that such action gives information about links further up the supply chain. The police do not report on instances where nothing of consequence was found.

I have very direct evidence of persons where a 'dob-in' or flimsy suggestion has resulted in a fruitless police invasion, where six uniformed police pile-drive a front door and find nothing of consequence. The human consequence has been a deepening of alienation and an intensifying of suicidal ideation. It constitutes a major contradiction with recent strategies for police to be accompanied by mental health personnel to situations where such persons may be of assistance.

Family and community attitudes

Where a young person has been apprehended and charged with, or convicted of, criminality relating to drug usage or petty trading, the impact on family stress can become intense and intensified. Impacts with employment and community acceptance can further deepen the stresses for the person concerned where the factors beneath their behaviour have not been addressed by such action.

Impact on young people and others - Examples

1. Family anxiety

Australia21 have noted that: "Fear of illicit drugs, their culture and consequences is widespread among parents".

This resonates where agency drug counsellors have reported that it may take twenty minutes to calm a parent down at the beginning of a phone call. The anxiety regarding an illicit drug is induced by its cultural illicit status, even though the danger from the substance, according to the research, is less than alcohol.

2. Family judgement

A mother rang me on the phone:

"I found a bong in my son's bedroom. I called my husband at work and he said to call the police and that our son must leave our house. I didn't think that his reaction would be so harsh – can you help me with any ways I could calm him down?"

I asked whether her husband drank alcohol. "Oh yes, quite a lot" she said. "It's a problem".

We had some conversation about how she might speak further with her husband, but she didn't sound too hopeful about a good outcome. She felt it was very likely her son would be thrown out.

And it was Christmas Eve!

3. The bust

A resident in a PICYS unit, next to my home, was pulled over by police when driving. They found a forged prescription in his vehicle and decided to conduct a raid on his unit. His girlfriend knocked on my door: "George could you come over, the police are here". Steve, his friend Billy and girlfriend, all at-risk young people, had been visited by six police officers – three plain clothed and three uniformed with guns on their belts.

After two and a half hours of intimidating search they found a bong in the wastepaper bin in the small kitchen. This appeared to be a trophy, but they left without any charge being laid.

The next day I found a poem, written on the wall of the nearby youth venue bathroom, by Billy. The last lines of the graphic poem read:

“Crave death’s eternal embrace to ease the pain”

This was police-intensified suicidal ideation.

I contributed this example at a Mental Health Week Seminar which had a focus on suicide awareness. The response was that it is difficult to deal with the police.

4. Scarborough public meeting

A mother at a Scarborough public meeting on drugs engaged me in conversation:

“I found a little bag of green stuff in my son’s bedroom and I called the police”

“I think that might have been a disaster” I responded.

The mother broke into tears and said: “Yes, I haven’t seen him for two years”.

Of course, this constituted damage far beyond that from tetrahydrocannabinol.

5. After prison

Neville had been in prison for five years. On exit he obtained a Housing Authority unit in a southern suburb of Perth which he shared with David, a long term friend of mine. Neville was trying to make a go of it but couldn’t find work and was subject to ill-health and depression. Neville was a smoker and David a fairly heavy drinker. David was often visited by young Noongar people plying him for cigarettes. Eventually David decided to decline the requests. This was met with anger.

Police conducting street-level drug busts in the area invited members of the public to “dob-in a dealer”, anonymously if they wished, such as reporting instances where premises had frequent visitors.

David rang me to report that their unit had been visited by six uniformed and armed police. He suspected that the disaffected Noongars had constructed a ‘dob-in’. Before Neville had been able to open the front door of his first floor unit the police had rammed the door. They severely searched the unit, pulling covers off the furniture and handcuffing David face down on his bed. After some time, having found nothing illegal, they left, without repairing the door.

David expressed concern that Neville had been suicidal for three days and it was hard going trying to be a support.

6. Suburban Drug Forum

It was a Western Suburbs local government forum on drugs. A mother went to the lectern and gave an impassioned speech about the dangers of heroin. When she sat down, a young woman rose from the rear of the room and went to the microphone. She introduced herself as the daughter of the woman who had just spoken, and said: “Heroin is not my problem, heroin is my solution”.

Why?

Richard Eckersley and others have argued that in discussion about drugs we are deficient in our addressing of the reasons behind forms of drug use. We excessively address symptoms rather than causes. It is of course fundamental to the success of residential therapeutic community that the deeper causes of drug use and dependency are addressed and that time is given to the restorative growth so important to recovery and health.

I offer the following alliteration as a way of scanning key drivers of drug usage:

1. Acceptance

This category can include 'recreational' use, in the same manner that many use a cigarette, beer or wine to relax with friends, to discuss the day. It can represent a symbol of inclusion and connection. A degree of peer pressure could be present as part of the peer culture.

It is irrational to such users that their drug of choice, less harmful than alcohol, and alcohol is clearly the most damaging of all in our culture, is treated as criminality in such settings. The acute dangers of alcohol and cigarettes are well documented but we don't prohibit. It would be counter-productive to do so, as demonstrated in the 1920s. The same rationale applies on a much wider basis.

It was particularly tragic that the 'alternative community' of the Nambucca region, NSW, with whom I had close association in the late 70s, were subject to a police blitz of major proportions to supposedly eradicate marijuana usage in the area. It was fairly transparent that the police action was as much to clear the district of the people as well as the 'pot'. Dwellings constructed on land owned by the alternative community, 'hippies', were torn down and life severely disrupted such that many of course needed to leave the district. An associate of mine from that community shortly afterwards suicided.

It was in stark contrast that an annual event was held in the same district, the 'Missabotti Beer Fest', in which 100 different German and other beers were featured in a festive environment, a more dangerous drug than the drug of choice of the hippies.

2. Adventure

It is a characteristic of growing up that we explore the world, not just of geography but of arts and experiences. Food, beverages and more are also part of the exploration. We will also want to enjoy the world of all these features where we can, sometimes with risk-taking behaviour, be it mountain climbing or substance use.

The critical issues here are knowing the effects of what we are using and having confidence in the purity of our supply. Prohibition in these areas will be adverse to both education and purity.

3. Acceleration

This covers the use of a substance to enhance coping with a work deadline or enhancing sport performance. Prohibition is not so much an issue where the main boundaries may be not what is used but the reason for which it is used, such as performance enhancing substances in professional sport.

4. Anxiety

This is where the substance is used to calm nerves and/or to alleviate an ongoing stressful circumstance. The traditional fag for the Anzacs was to cope with enduring warfare and associated injury. Heroin in Vietnam was aimed at emotional survival. Cannabis and other substances are utilised by persons facing varieties of stress.

It follows of course that if we come down hard on such alleviation usage, without addressing the stress itself, we are likely to worsen the overall situation.

It is a given in the adult world, for example, that if a colleague suddenly begins to hit the whisky bottle, we don't give them a pamphlet on what whisky does to the liver. We automatically ask what is happening in the business or at family level that has produced the need for the excess usage.

It is common experience with the onset of a toothache, to take a pain killer. A root nerve is rarely tolerable without the panadol. There is of course a major reality of emotional pain, with a comparable need to pacify the effects. Heroin and other illicit substances are for many the most effective self-medication they have found. Heroin is a benign drug which does not damage any body organ. The essential risk is from overdose or impurity. Prohibition activity will both deepen anxiety and have negative impact on purity.

5. Alteration

This addresses the more serious levels of disillusionment. A young person alone in a boring flat can change that dull wall into a kaleidoscope of colour and pageant by consuming a mind-altering substance such as acid, LSD.

To be punished for the usage is likely to intensify the disillusion, and reinforce the deeper problems. The need for a chemical to change one's world artificially is reduced by actions which change the actual world for that person. This imports the rationale of social or justice reinvestment.

6. Anger

The deeper levels of disconnection are present when a person carries anger about that disconnection, being left out, being rejected, disrespected and alone on the inside. many actions will be random, hitting out at whatever and whomever is around. Substance abuse will be part of that anger and 'I don't care'. There is similarity to self-harm to distract from the deeper issues. Crime activity is carried out without empathy for the victim.

Punitive action from prohibition status will of course intensify that anger and despair at finding solution to deeper and wider issues.

7. Alienation

This is the most severe condition, where a person in fact feels like an alien in relationship to the rest of society, different, disconnected, deeply disillusioned.

Rationality is not a component of thinking or behaviour. Punitive action may well deepen the alienation and intensify suicidal ideation.

In areas 1&2 criminality constitutes an overreaction.

In areas 4-6 criminality is particularly counter-productive.

The further down the list the more adverse are the effects of criminality and prohibition. In the culture of street life the lower levels outlined are the more common dynamics, but the same population is the more likely to be the subject of police activity.

Summary:

For the majority young people at risk with whom I have had close association, childhood instability and abuse have resulted in a low threshold for stress and "failure" in education and employment systems. They are given messages of non-fit which they believe and act out. Their non-belonging is reinforced and disillusionment and alienation at deep levels is often the consequence. Such persons are at high risk of adopting a survival lifestyle in which they adopt an adversarial stance with the wider community around them. They are in the very high suicide risk area and exhibit a high rate of offending. Drug use is endemic to their pattern of life. It is a bonding, a coping mechanism, a symbol of community in an otherwise alien world.

What about the environment?

It is a given that the quality of soil is a major influence on plant growth. Likewise, social or 'habitat' factors have profound influence in human growth and health.

At the National Drug Educators' Workshop in Perth 1988 a session was led by a member of the National committee of NCADA, the National Campaign Against Drug Abuse. He outlined the work of Ron Labonté, an international scholar in Population Health, which had been presented to the Committee. Labonté argued that to the extent that we deny or undervalue the context, environment and formative influences affecting an individual's behaviour we are guilty of "blaming". We say "you must change, you need this information, you must act this or that way". Whatever the content, the focus is towards the individual. Frequently this transfers to the individual responsibility for factors which have been beyond that individual's and which need due attention themselves.

The assessment of the presenter was that Labonté's work was seen as particularly relevant. The Committee's response had been that they had "got it all wrong" in the first three years of the National Drug Offensive and that the next three years would have the theme of "community development"!

In the light of the above, the oft quoted idea that someone should "take responsibility" for their actions comprehensively ignores the external factors which may have, or have had, influence on that person's growth and behaviour. Labonté's 'blaming' scenario is rife and enshrined in the dynamics of prohibition.

Opposing positions

A number of slogans in resistance to decriminalisation and/or legalisation of drugs are commonplace.

"It would open the floodgates"

Legalisation with controls is not a floodgate scenario anymore than alcohol legalisation with controls constitutes a floodgate.

"It would add a drug"

Some who admit that alcohol is damaging argue that "we don't want to add another one". Cannabis and various other illicit drugs are extensively available now and will continue to be in the widely recognised failure of the 'war on drugs'. Damage is reduced when purity is assured, sensible controls are in place and money is directed to individual and environmental causes for excess use.

"Cannabis a gateway drug"

Dealers are frequently a supermarket such that illicit cannabis is more likely to be a 'gateway' drug than licit cannabis.

It would send a wrong "message"

High risk street-present young people know that cannabis is used by lawyers, doctors, police, business people, politicians, teachers and more, but rarely do they get busted. The "message" consequence is a deep seated cynicism and resentment regarding this duplicity. The 'establishment' is seen as living in the clouds, or perhaps in de-facto collusion with a massive industry. Those least at risk may accept a conventional political wisdom. Those more at risk are not waiting on what they see as simplistic statements from distant personnel.