



Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Health**
Office of the Director General



Our Ref: D-AA-18/78232
Your Ref: A721294
Contact: Neil Keen
9222 2161

Hon Alison Xamon MLC
Chair
Select Committee into Alternate Approaches
to Reducing Illicit Drug Use and its Effects on the Community
Legislative Council Community Office
Parliament House
GPO Box A11
PERTH WA 6837

Dear Ms Xamon

**INQUIRY INTO ALTERNATE APPROACHES TO REDUCING ILLICIT DRUG USE
AND ITS EFFECTS ON THE COMMUNITY**

Thank you for your letter of 23 October 2018, inviting the Western Australian (WA) Department of Health (DOH) to provide a written submission to the Committee, on the matters to be considered under the terms of this Inquiry.

As you may be aware, the core function of the DOH in relation to illicit drug use is in the acute care of affected individuals, either through presentation to Emergency Departments (EDs), or hospitalisation.

The specific challenges facing front line health care emergency workers in providing emergency care to this group are well documented in Australia. The urgent care of those presenting to hospitals due to illicit drug use, such as amphetamines, has a major impact on EDs. Patients are often agitated and aggressive, require extensive resources and frequently re-attend.¹ Up to half of the violence experienced by health care workers in EDs may be related to substance use.²

¹ Gray SD, Fatovich DM, McCoubrie DL, Daly FF. Amphetamine-related presentations to an inner-city tertiary emergency department: a prospective evaluation. MJA 2007; 186: 336-339.

² Kennedy MP. Violence in emergency departments: under-reported, unconstrained, and unconscionable. MJA 2005; 183: 362-365.

A recent report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)³ highlights the nature and magnitude of the current challenges and issues for the acute health sector in respect to certain illicit drugs. This report suggests that:

- opioid deaths and overdose hospitalisations have increased in the last ten years, and are at the highest level since a peak in 1999;
- legal pharmaceutical opioids are responsible for more deaths and poisonings than illegal opioids, such as heroin;
- around 10% of Australians have misused a legal opioid for an illicit (or non-medical) purpose, at some time;
- there are differences in usage patterns seen between metropolitan and regional areas; and
- Canada, with a comparable health system to Australia, also faces some similar issues in relation to opioids.

Opioid misuse also appears to be an increasing public health concern internationally, in a number of other developed health systems, such as the United States⁴; however, the AIHW Report does illustrate how the exact drugs involved, patterns of usage and related harm can still differ between countries.

The DOH also oversees a number of public health measures, such as coordination of needle and syringe exchange programs, which are designed to prevent and mitigate the health complications of drug use, like the transmission of blood-borne viruses. Expenditure on these programs can be shown to be cost-effective over time. I note that the DOH has a substantial role in regulating licit use of medicines and ensuring the integrity of the legal pharmaceutical supply chain in WA.

The DOH is certainly available, as required, for the Select Committee to draw upon, to provide additional information and evidence on the existing activities of the WA DOH, and the current challenges to the acute system in the treatment of harms relating to illicit drug use.

Yours sincerely



Dr D J Russell-Weisz
DIRECTOR GENERAL

19 November 2018

³ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2018. Opioid harm in Australia and comparisons between Australia and Canada. Cat. no. HSE 210. Canberra: AIHW

⁴ Mack KA, Jones CM, Ballesteros MF. Illicit Drug Use, Illicit Drug Use Disorders, and Drug Overdose Deaths in Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Areas — United States. *MMWR Surveill Summ* 2017; 66 (No. SS-19):1–12. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.ss6619a1>