

'The case for a Supervised Injecting Facility in Melbourne'

The following article has been written by Mr Greg Denham, Executive Officer of the Yarra Drug and Health Forum, Melbourne. The text includes excerpts from the Position Paper '*The potential and viability of establishing a Supervised Injecting Facility (SIF)*' (Burnet Institute 2009) and additional material added by the author. The complete Position Paper can be found at:

<http://www.ydhf.org.au/SIF%20Position%20Paper%20YDHF.pdf>

The Yarra Drug and Health Forum was formed 15 years ago as a means to engage the community of Yarra in action around drug and alcohol issues. The YDHF has over this time established itself as one of the foremost community-based forums that seeks to address the impact of drugs and alcohol through advocacy and action. The forum is made up of alcohol and drug agencies, local and state government representatives, police, residents, allied health a social welfare groups and business groups.

Victoria first engaged in public debate about Supervised Injecting Facilities (SIF) in 1998, during a time when the daily 'heroin toll' was listed alongside the road toll in one of the state's most prominent newspapers. Fatal and non-fatal overdoses were at levels previously unseen; this and the visibility of active illicit street drug markets across Melbourne drew increasing public attention. Whilst there was intermittent support for the establishment of a SIF on both sides of politics at the time enthusiasm for their establishment started to wain in early 2000 due to increased pressure from hostile residents groups in the city of Melbourne and eventually supportive legislation was defeated in the Victorian parliament.

The YDHF has in recent years taken up the challenge of advocating for the establishment of a SIF to address ongoing concerns about public injecting, overdoses and discarding of used injecting equipment in the City of Yarra, particularly in North Richmond and surrounding areas. It is widely reported that North Richmond has an active street-based drug market with Victoria Street and the adjacent areas frequented by injecting drug users many of whom come from all over Melbourne to purchase and use their drug of choice, heroin. The street scene in North Richmond as far as the heroin market is concerned was recently described as the 'perfect storm' with all of the necessary ingredients to create and maintain an active illicit drug market.

The Yarra Drug and Health Forum (YDHF) has operated as a community based solution to drug and alcohol issues in the City of Yarra in inner-city Melbourne for 15 years. The Forum has over that time represented the views and concerns of a broad range of drug and alcohol

agencies, residents, business groups, government and non-government organisations and various other interested parties and has been a mainstay in efforts to address illicit drug issues particularly around public injecting.

In order to gain a collective input for the purpose of developing a position paper on the potential and viability of a SIF in Melbourne the YDHF commissioned the Burnet Institute in October 2009 to write: 'The potential and viability of establishing a Supervised Injecting Facility (SIF) in Melbourne' . The paper is a summary of the evidence generated through a review of published and unpublished literature and key expert consultation.

The paper outlines the social, environmental, and public health conditions which would precede the introduction of a SIF. The paper clearly outlines the benefits of SIFs in terms of disease prevention , particularly blood born viruses, overdose death prevention and improvement in public amenity. There is also strong evidence that SIFs provide an important bridge to drug treatment and other health and welfare services for disadvantaged and marginalised groups as well as having no negative impacts on crime and drug rates of use.

According to Harm Reduction International, globally sixty cities have one or more Drug Consumption Room and many have been operating for over twenty years. However, only two sites exist in English speaking countries; Australia (Sydney) and Canada (Vancouver).

So, whilst the benefits of a SIF has been identified locally and internationally there have been no policy initiatives in Victoria on this issue in recent years. The landscape politically changed somewhat however in the middle of this year when the City of Yarra local council voted 6-1 in favour of supporting the establishment of a SIF.

As a result of this vote, a significant amount of media interest was generated with extensive coverage across most media outlets including radio, print and television. The majority of the media reporting on the issue was very supportive of the proposal to establish a SIF. Even tabloid press and the more conservative radio commentators spoke in favour.

Recently an article appeared in the Melbourne Times Weekly which covered a public meeting on SIFs conducted at the Richmond Town Hall on July 21st. The article reported on the overwhelming support that the meetings participants gave to the notion of a SIF in Yarra:

27 Jul 2011 - Melbourne Times Weekly 'Residents back council push for injecting facility '

'In a space you consider your own, you have to constantly consider your own behaviour'

'THE establishment of a supervised injecting facility is a "long-term project"', Yarra mayor Alison Clarke told a community drugs forum last week. Despite the state government's rejection of the controversial idea, Cr Clarke said the council would continue to advocate for it. "They've been pretty clear [about their position], but we'll keep asking them," she said. Cr Clarke announced the council's intention to seek support from the Municipal Association of Victoria, and to continue to try to canvass support from the opposition, which does not support a safe injecting facility.

About 35 residents attended the Yarra Drug & Health Forum last Thursday night. All residents who spoke at the meeting supported an injecting room. Michelle, from Abbotsford, told the forum it was a daily stress for residents who see and hear drug users in their streets.'

Unfortunately, whilst there appeared to be overwhelming community support for the council's position, there was no response from the state government to the issue other than a firm 'no'. Where to from here? The YDHF intends to conduct an ongoing advocacy campaign in support of the establishment of a SIF to address the needs of both injecting drug users and the broader community in the City of Yarra. This advocacy strategy will involve strengthening the ground-swell of support as well as seek endorsement from highly regarded groups and individuals residing outside the local area. A community survey will be conducted in the near future and a petition is currently circulating seeking endorsement from supporters. In addition is it planned to conduct further research that will give provide more details about viable SIF models that will meet the specific needs of North Richmond.