



YARRA DRUG AND HEALTH FORUM – SUBMISSION:

Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pilot Medically Supervised Injecting Centre) Bill 2017

Circumstances

On 22 February 2017, the Legislative Council agreed to the following motion:

That this Bill be referred to the Legal and Social Issues Committee for report, no later than 5 September 2017, on a review and consideration of the —

- 1.recommendations in Coroner Hawkins’ Finding Inquest into the Death of Ms A, delivered on 20 February 2017 and other relevant reports;
- 2.nature and extent of current, relevant regulations;
- 3.and nature and extent of associated, relevant policing policy

This is the submission of the Yarra Drug and Health Forum’s submission into this Committee’s report.

Background - YDHF

The Yarra Drug and Health Forum (YDHF) has been operating in the City of Yarra for 20 years having been formed in 1996 as a community-based response to local illicit drug issues. YDHF is widely recognised as the foremost community-based forum that works with a broad range of stakeholders to reduce drug related harms in Yarra. To achieve this aim, YDHF holds monthly member meetings, conducts quarterly community forums and attends numerous agency meetings with local non-government organisations (NGOs). A major focus of YDHF are the linkages that the forum creates with social, welfare and health groups and its advocacy efforts to create a more evidence-informed policy environment to address alcohol and drug issues in Yarra. YDHF is funded through the Department of Health and Human Services’ Local Drug Strategy and a City of Yarra grant.

When YDHF commenced in 1996 there was significant community concern across Melbourne brought about by street-based heroin markets. A flood of heroin was causing high numbers of overdoses with record numbers of deaths. Several areas emerged where heroin was openly bought and sold, these were known as ‘hot spots’. Hot spot locations at that time included Melbourne CBD, Footscray, St Kilda, Springvale, Dandenong and Collingwood.

The Yarra Drug and Health Forum started as a grass-roots, community-based meeting called to respond to the concerns of residents and traders about the heroin 'hot spot' market in Smith Street, Collingwood. It has since evolved into a strong advocacy agency promoting local solutions to local issues .

With the advent of a 'levelling off' in the supply of heroin in the early 2000's (often referred to as the 'heroin drought') several of the markets started to recede. Evidence indicates that a shift in drug production priorities in South East Asia and climatic changes in opium growing countries such as Myanmar led to a reduction in heroin supply in Australia. As a result, heroin hot spot street markets became more fragmented, covert and transient, with heroin sales managed through mobile phones and later through social media.

Emergence of North Richmond Drug Market

However, despite street markets receding in several parts of Melbourne, an active and open heroin market, similar to that seen in previous hot spot areas, started growing almost immediately in the area bordered by Victoria, Lennox, Elizabeth and Church Streets in North Richmond. It is generally acknowledged that this market grew due to a number of factors:

- the easy accessibility to the area by public transport and private motor vehicles
- the location of Office of Housing Estates that house numerous people involved in the drug market
- the complex nature of the laneways, alleys, car parks, rear of shops and streetscape
- involvement of some shopkeepers in heroin trafficking
- displacement of the illicit drug market from the Melbourne CBD, Footscray and Smith Street due to gentrification, intensive policing operations and the establishment of CCTV

This area, often referred to as simply 'North Richmond', has been described by police as the 'perfect storm' in terms of the type of environment where a drug market can survive and thrive, resulting in:

- a well-established history as a regional focal point for illicit drug trafficking and consumption, particularly around North Richmond, Victoria Street and the Housing Estates.
- an average annual rate of 23.7 overdoses between 2009-2015, the highest for any LGA in Victoria, with pharmaceuticals and illicit drugs constituting the bulk of overdoses in this period.
- ambulance attendances rates per 100,000 persons highest rate for both heroin and benzodiazepines.
- In 2015 19 people died in North Richmond and a further 15 died after apparently obtaining heroin in the City of Yarra.
- North Richmond needle exchange distributes 70,000 syringes each month.

There has been a significant amount of public discussion and media exposure on the impact of public injecting in the North Richmond over many years, with particular interest in the area comprising the high-rise public housing estates and surrounding streets and laneways. An active street-based heroin market has now existed in the location for over a decade, with people who inject drugs coming from all over Melbourne to purchase and use heroin.

Much of the attention focused on the North Richmond heroin market has highlighted community concerns such as frequent overdoses (including deaths), discarding of drug injecting equipment and the witnessing of public injecting, drug affected people, violence, threatening behaviour and public nuisance.

Response

Despite repeated efforts by YDHF and a number of other agencies to raise awareness of the impact of the drug market in North Richmond and frequent calls for evidence-based health programs the main response to the issue has been intensive policing operations.

For example, toward the end of the 2000's and up until 2011 Victoria Police conducted several major intensive operations known as 'Operation Elizabeth'. This was a biannual 'crackdown' that involved several arms of policing saturating the area and arresting people suspected of being involved in the illicit drug market. Police units involved included mobile patrols, dog squad, mounted police and foot patrols. It was not uncommon during these campaigns to see police interrogating and searching suspects in the street.

A major impact of these policing operations was the displacement of the drug market, including public injecting, into areas that had not experienced the drug market previously. Areas that began to emerge as new drug zones because of the shift in the market included East Melbourne and Abbotsford.

The impact of public injecting that had moved into the residential areas of Abbotsford in 2010-2011 caused significant public concern and led to numerous complaints by residents to Yarra council, police and the YDHF. Public meetings were held which led to a motion being put to council by the YDHF for the establishment of a Supervised Injecting Facility – sometimes known as Drug Consumption Rooms - to address these concerns. Council passed a motion 6-1 in favor of a trial of a Supervised Injecting Facility in North Richmond. A motion put to council on the same evening to install CCTV cameras in Victoria Street was defeated due to a lack of evidence of their effectiveness and concerns about permanently displacing the problem to surrounding areas. The state government at that time dismissed the proposal for a Supervised Injecting Facility without consultation.

Supervised Injecting Facility

Over many years, the Yarra Drug and Health Forum has championed the cause of the establishment of a Supervised Injecting Facility, as well as several other programs, that would reduce the impact of public injecting in the Victoria Street precinct. For example, discussions about the possibility of establishing a Supervised Injecting Facility in the City of Yarra were first raised in 2005 during several public meetings convened by YDHF. Concerned residents at those meetings requested YDHF to facilitate the establishment of a facility similar to the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) in Sydney.

YDHF, through the Burnet Institute, commissioned a discussion paper; 'The potential and viability of establishing a Supervised Injecting Facility in Melbourne'. Released in October 2009, the paper provided clear evidence of the need for a SIF in areas of:

- Prominence of public injecting;
- High rates of hepatitis C amongst injecting drug users;
- High occurrence of serious and potentially serious injecting related injuries and disease amongst injecting drug users;
- High numbers of fatal and non-fatal overdoses occurring in public places;
- Community concern around publicly discarded injecting equipment

A further study by Burnet Institute, released in 2013; 'North Richmond Public Injecting Impact Study' recommended, amongst other things:

'That the Victorian Government establish a Supervised Injecting Facility in North Richmond, on a trial basis and subject to rigorous evaluation'

Since that time YDHF has led community debate and discussion on the establishment of a Supervised Injecting Facility along with several other initiatives to reduce drug harms in the area. YDHF has advocated for the need for the introduction of life-saving overdose reversal drug Naloxone, the installation of needle and syringe dispensing machines, meeting the needs of post-release prisoners and other marginalized and disadvantaged people experiencing drug problems in the area, an increase in street-based drug safety workers and increased efforts by City of Yarra to address amenity issues related to discarded needles and syringes.

As a result, Naloxone has been available on prescription for last past three years and recently North Richmond Community Health installed a needle and syringe dispensing unit. City of Yarra has increased efforts to ensure that the impact of discarded needles and syringes is addressed by stepping up collection efforts including increasing the number of sharps containers.

Despite these efforts, the Victoria Street precinct continues to experience the levels of drug related harms which is consistent with previous years. Attempts to establish a Supervised Injecting Facility in the Victoria Street precinct, either fixed site or mobile, have not progressed. YDHF has generated a significant amount of advocacy material in support of the establishment of a Supervised Injecting Facility, much of which can be found on the YDHF website: www.ydhf.org.au

Advocacy for Supervised Injecting Facility

Advocacy efforts to establish a Supervised Injecting Facility have, for the most part, been dismissed at state government level. Despite strong support from the City of Yarra, the Victoria Street Traders' Association, residents groups, a plethora of alcohol and drug agencies including the peak body VAADA, the AMA, social, welfare and health agencies and so on, there has been no positive engagement on the issue.

YDHF has written to and met with state government representatives on numerous occasions over the past six years in order to draw attention to the impact of the illicit drug market and the need for the establishment of a Supervised Injecting Facility. These efforts have been largely dismissed or ignored. YDHF has on every occasion attempted to highlight the human toll from overdose, which is best summarized by correspondence from the State Coroners Office:

'...the Courts analysis of the circumstances of the Victorian heroin overdose deaths for 2015 indicates that a substantial proportion of them – over 20% - can be linked directly to a relatively small area in Richmond and Abbotsford. These include deaths that occurred in the area, and deaths that occurred in the other areas where there was positive evidence the deceased obtained heroin in Richmond and Abbotsford.'

There is now growing concern over the risk of HIV and other blood borne virus transmission amongst some key affected groups that frequent the area and inject drugs. Reports from police also indicate that the North Richmond drug market, once a 'lineal' exchange between the high-rise estates and drug runners in Victoria Street, has now become entrenched with new and more sophisticated networks gaining ground.

Despite the evidence obtained from consumptions rooms that have been established in over eighty cities world-wide (including Sydney) the public debate about the viability of Supervised Injecting Facility in Victoria has invariably been reduced to simplistic and somewhat dismissive rhetoric. Statements from policy makers in response to advocacy efforts on this issue invariably result in counter-claims that these programs '*send the wrong message*' or '*undermine the anti-drug message*'. There is a distinct lack of an informed, evidence-based and nuanced discussion about the viability of programs such as Supervised Injecting Facility in this state.

International Experience

According to Harm Reduction International, ten countries around the world operate drug consumption rooms (including Supervised Injecting Facilities). All but two of these services are found in Western Europe – the exceptions being in Vancouver, Canada, and Sydney, Australia. Consumption rooms are professionally supervised healthcare facilities where people can consume drugs in safe conditions. They aim to attract hard-to-reach populations who may usually use drugs in risky and unhygienic conditions.

One of the primary goals is to reduce morbidity and mortality by providing a safe environment and by training people on safer drug use. Consumption rooms initially evolved as a response to health and public order problems linked to open drug scenes and drug markets in cities where a network of harm reduction services already existed but where difficulties were encountered in responding to the needs of people who use drugs.

In 2016, there were 90 DCRs operating worldwide in Canada, Australia, Denmark, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Norway, Spain and Switzerland. In October 2016, a consumption room was introduced in Paris, France, and an increase in these sites has been seen in the Netherlands and Canada. However, both Switzerland and Spain have reduced the number of sites by one. Ireland and Scotland plan to introduce supervised injecting facilities soon and recent media reports suggest that consumption rooms are being considered in the United States.

In terms of the international evidence in support of the introduction of consumption rooms, including Supervised Injecting Facilities:

- no fatal overdoses
- reduced public injecting
- improved amenity
- cost effective – reduction in emergency service responses

- no increased crime
- provide a bridge to treatment
- reduce demands on emergency services

Submission

It is the submission of the Yarra Drug and Health Forum therefore that legislation should be enacted to establish a Supervised Injecting Facility to reduce the harms from illicit drug use in North Richmond and surrounding areas. Once this legislation is passed, a model should be developed that enables existing community-based health services, including primary health care facilities, to incorporate areas within their sites for people to consume illicit drugs safely. In addition to this facility, existing health-based services require significant expansion and scaling-up.

Whilst a model of health care similar to that of the successful Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (MSIC) in Sydney is ideal, this model is not necessarily the preferred option. Ideally, the incorporation of areas for drug consumption within existing health service could occur throughout Melbourne where street-based and other marginalised and at risk-drug users exist (such as Footscray and the emerging street market in Sunshine). Health facilities could quite easily be adapted and resourced with minimal cost which could be funded through confiscation of assets programs and not taken from existing health budgets.

As a matter of note, evaluations of the Sydney MSIC conducted over a ten year period (2001-2010) have found:

- There has been an 80% reduction in ambulance call-outs to Kings Cross
- The number of discarded syringes in the area has halved, improving public amenity
- Over 3,500 overdoses have been successfully managed at the Centre without a single fatality
- Independent evaluations have demonstrated no increase of crime in the area
- Three quarters of the injecting facility clients had never previously been in contact with drug treatment services

It is therefore the submission of the YDHF that laws enabling the establishment of Supervised Injecting Facilities be enacted as a matter of urgency. Once this law is passed, such a facility be established in North Richmond and other parts of Melbourne within existing health services as part of comprehensive, state-wide response to the issue of overdose and other drug-related harms.



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