

Drug Policy Expert Committee

Stage 2 Report



Drugs: Meeting the Challenge

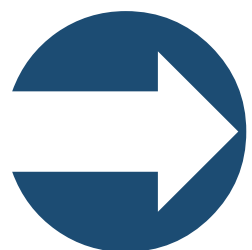
Executive Summary & Recommendations

*Victoria: Drug Policy Expert Committee
Drugs: Meeting the Challenge
Stage Two Report: November 2000*

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Drug Policy Expert Committee **Stage 2 Report** Drugs: Meeting the Challenge



Introduction Victorians are rightly concerned about the impact drugs are having on many individuals, families, businesses and communities. Misuse of drugs causes health problems and personal disruption to the user and those in contact with them. Illegal drugs have these effects and associated crime creates additional costs. The costs are not only financial or economic, but also personal and emotional. Some people pay with their lives. Victoria Police, education and health services have taken substantial initiatives in recent years and noticeable improvements can be seen in services and cross-service collaboration. Yet while some positive developments have occurred, the situation has deteriorated. The current arrangements remain insufficient and reform and further development are required. We face a major challenge.

In November 1999, the Victorian Government appointed the **Drug Policy Expert Committee** to provide advice on drug policy. The terms of reference required the Committee to produce two reports. The first report documented a detailed framework for the conduct of a rigorous, multi-site trial of injecting facilities, and a planning process led by local government and was presented in April 2000. The report also recommended the implementation of a 'community mobilisation' strategy to strengthen the level of community involvement in drug issues. This report deals with a broad range of issues that must be dealt with if the problems resulting from drug use are to be tackled. Many issues discussed in the first report in relation to community mobilisation are included in this report to ensure a comprehensive strategy is provided for the Government and the community to consider.

The Committee's report is premised on a commitment to the harm-minimisation philosophy that has underpinned drug policy in Australia since the middle of the 1980s. In its work, the Committee has been mindful of the need to ensure that funds are invested in ways that best contribute to controlling supply, reducing demand and implementing harm-reduction strategies.

The Committee has used a range of processes in preparing this report. It has organised or participated in a wide variety of community meetings and discussions, specialist forums and meeting with interest groups and service providers. It has also received many written submissions. The Committee appreciates the wise advice and assistance provided through these processes.

The facts People use drugs for diverse reasons. Many do so safely and, in the case of appropriate use of alcohol and prescription drugs, receive benefits including improved health and enjoyment as a result. Unfortunately, drugs also cause pain, ill health, social disruption and death. People who become involved in damaging or dangerous drug use come from all parts of our community. The common consequence of sustained misuse is that they become marginalised from society.



Key facts about drug use, misuse and the costs are:

- tobacco use remains the biggest killer in Australia with 18,200 deaths attributable to it. There are 3,700 attributable to alcohol and approximately 800 to illegal drugs. The number of deaths attributable to illegal drugs is growing rapidly in this State and across the country. The trend in overdose deaths in Victoria indicates that the high level of overdose experienced in 1999 (359) will be sustained this year. Deaths from illegal drugs occur at a much earlier age than for tobacco;
- alcohol is widely used, and more than a half of Victorian men and more than a third of Victorian women drink regularly. Victorians start drinking early. By Year 11 of schooling, around 50 per cent of students are drinking regularly. Young Victorians also engage in 'binge' drinking regularly;
- in Australia and Victoria, the price of most illegal drugs is steady or falling, while heroin level of purity is steady or rising. Most drugs are easily available to users. Legal controls over price, content and availability of tobacco and alcohol are much more effective than those for illegal drugs but are only partly successful;
- cannabis is, by far, the most used illegal drug. More than half of all students reported having tried cannabis by Year 12; and
- the number of young people under 16 years who have used heroin increased from less than 1 per cent in 1993 to 7 per cent in 1998.

The Committee particularly wishes to highlight the impact that drug use is having upon services managed or funded by the State Government:

- over 7 per cent of 16 year olds and 11 per cent of 17 year olds are either not in education or are unemployed. Both situations are significant risk factors for drug use;
- almost 1,000 children have been effectively orphaned as a result of parental overdose in recent years;
- a recent program audit has shown that substance misuse and family violence were evident in 85 per cent of child protection cases involving risk assessment;
- more than half of the adolescents in Placement and Support services were reported to have an alcohol and/or drug problem;
- an estimated 30 to 60 per cent of people in acquired brain injury treatment programs have a history of problematic substance use;
- there were 61,279 hospital admissions for drug-related illnesses in 1998-99; and
- over 40 per cent of all prisoners acknowledge that their offence was a consequence of drug problems. More than 80 per cent of men and 90 per cent of women returning to prison identify themselves as having a drug problem.

Controlling supply has always been an important part of drug strategy in relation to illegal drugs and will remain so at international, national and State levels. Victoria Police has developed a range of strategies that seek to reduce supply and, in some cases, contribute to reducing demand. However, it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved, even with the best efforts of all law enforcement agencies. Global production of illegal drugs is growing and so is the gap between production and seizures, despite increased efforts and resources. Key facts are:

- the highly organised illegal drug market is increasingly global. It is characterised by high profits, high levels of investment in security and transport, and increasingly sophisticated marketing and production methods;
- opium production reached a new peak in 1999 and would enable the manufacture of almost 600 metric tonnes of heroin. Seizures have never accounted for more than 15 per cent of global production; and
- stimulant production is reported to be growing rapidly in Asia.

Australia remains a favoured destination given our affluence, proximity to the sources of production, and the ease of importation resulting from our size and level of trade. There are suggestions that stimulants produced overseas may increasingly be imported into Australia. This would expand the market and potentially disrupt existing markets. Recent increases in the resources provided to the Australian Customs Service and the Federal Police have increased their capacity, but research demonstrates that major seizures have no impact on price or availability on the streets.

Marijuana is rarely imported and remains freely available. It is becoming harder for police to detect given the introduction of hydroponic growth arrangements.

Legal drugs are also subject to supply controls. Tobacco and alcohol supply controls relate particularly to sales to minors. The evidence is that these controls are not fully effective as there are rising levels of drinking and smoking in some population groups. Pharmaceutical drugs are also subject to rigorous supply control arrangements based on the level of risk posed. Again, there is evidence of considerable misuse and diversion of these drugs. Improvements in all of these supply control mechanisms are warranted, but they are unlikely to eliminate or significantly reduce the problem. Demand is always likely to fuel supply.

Demand for drugs is a complex issue. As noted above, people use and misuse drugs for a diverse range of reasons. Understanding these reasons is critical to developing strategies that reduce demand overall and the harm that results from continued use.



Objectives Based on work done to develop a set of national objectives specifically related to illegal drugs, the Committee has identified the following objectives to guide the implementation of Victoria’s drug strategy (this is a substantially edited summary of the objectives provided in the full report):

PREVENTION

Focusing on reducing demand and promoting opportunities, settings, and values that encourage resilience and reduce risk, to:

Prevent the uptake of illegal drug use.	Delay the uptake of drug use.
Increase the positive alternatives to drug use.	Foster a community that supports the family.
Provide educational environments that are supportive and inclusive for young people.	Increase community understanding of drugs.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Using interventions to reduce availability and supply, to:

Prevent and effectively disrupt illegal drug supply and punish offenders.	Reduce street-level dealing in drugs.
Refer to counselling, treatment and other services minor offenders appropriately diverted from or within the criminal justice system.	Provide focused interventions for repeat offenders.

GETTING LIVES BACK ON TRACK

Through providing treatment and support, to:

Strengthen the capacity of mainstream agencies to meet the needs of people affected by drug use.	Maintain a strong, effective and integrated drug treatment system.
Attract and retain drug users in treatment early in the course of harmful use.	Improve the health and status of drug users.
Increase the support for drug users seeking to establish new and different lifestyles.	Increase capacity to provide support to the families of drug users.

SAVING LIVES

In reducing drug-related harm, to:

Reduce the harm for individuals who use drugs and their families.	Strengthen focus and increase skill in applying harm-minimisation strategies.
Improve the environment for the community in areas of high public drug use.	Increase the capacity of law enforcement agencies in reducing the harm caused by illegal drug use.

CAPACITY BUILDING

Through workforce development, to:

Further develop effective workforces in relevant areas.	Increase capacity to attract and retain a highly skilled, specialist treatment workforce.
Increase the capacity of the generalist health and welfare workforce to tackle drug issues.	Continue to educate relevant workforces in principles that underpin the drug policy.
Maintain a skilled and supported drug law enforcement workforce.	Develop a more skilled and supported health-promotion workforce.

Through research, the State Government aims to:

Increase evidence-based practice in health, education, welfare and law enforcement sectors.	Increase instances of integrated collaborative research, development and dissemination.
Better focus research priorities.	

Through performance measurement and formal evaluation, monitor and evaluate the drug strategy.

Key Challenges Having regard to these objectives, the Committee has identified the key challenges, which the community, in partnership with the Victorian Government, must meet. It has developed responses that it believes will assist in these critical tasks.

Challenge

TO ESTABLISH A CONCEPTUAL PLATFORM ON WHICH DRUG POLICY IS BASED THAT WILL SATISFY THE ESSENTIAL REQUIREMENTS FOR ONGOING POLICY AND STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT.

Response

The Committee proposes that the principles of the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion should guide the ongoing development of drug policy and strategy. The charter principles emphasise the need for a structural approach that involves all elements of the community and the social infrastructure to enable people to improve and increase control over their wellbeing. It also incorporates the harm-minimisation philosophy involving investments in supply control, demand reduction and harm reduction.

These principles and philosophy should apply to the management of legal and illegal drugs in Victoria through an integrated strategy.

Challenge

TO ENSURE THAT THE COMMUNITY IS EFFECTIVELY INVOLVED IN TACKLING DRUG ISSUES AT ALL LEVELS.

Response

As it has stressed in its Stage One report, the Committee strongly believes the community must be mobilised to tackle the drug problem effectively. The community has a role in prevention, treatment, community safety and in supporting the reintegration of drug users who are seeking to reduce or stop using and adopt a lifestyle independent of the drug culture. To contribute in these ways, and to be involved in further reforms, the community needs to be well informed about drug issues.

Communities can be mobilised in many ways and by many organisations. Various individuals, community organisations and business groups are willing to contribute. The Committee strongly affirms the role of local government in facilitating and supporting this effort through local drug strategies, crime prevention or public health plans. The State Government must build on community will and commitment by encouraging, supporting and resourcing effective strategies to involve the community in tackling the drug issue.

Challenge

TO SIGNIFICANTLY LIFT THE PROFILE AND BREADTH OF THE PREVENTION EFFORT.

Response

Efforts to prevent drug use have too often been limited, ad hoc and short term. There is now strong evidence about where to target prevention efforts, and clear indications about how to mount effective prevention strategies. It is critical that the components of a prevention strategy are integrated, sustained and based on evidence of effectiveness rather than common perceptions about what works.

The Committee believes prevention of drug use and misuse can occur in many settings and affect the behaviour of people of all ages. The Committee considers an increased effort is now essential. In the first instance, particular attention should be paid to:

Community mobilisation	Enhancement of school environments
Communications	A coordinated approach to vulnerable young people
Support for parents	A tertiary prevention strategy focused on current users

As cannabis is the most used illegal drug in Victoria, the Committee advocates that in the context of the overall strategy proposed, a priority should be given to reduce its hazardous use.

Challenge

TO STRENGTHEN THE CAPACITY OF HEALTH AND COMMUNITY SERVICES TO MEET THE NEEDS OF CHANGING USER GROUPS.

Response

There is evidence that many education, health, housing, justice and welfare services are under increasing stress as a result of drug use. In many cases, the change in client profiles and needs is undermining these programs' capacity to effectively deliver their core services. This also results in less capacity to adequately engage in prevention efforts and assist in the reintegration of drug users.

The Committee proposes that relevant programs must reassess program design, staffing and other arrangements with a view to improving their overall effectiveness in the light of the extra demands placed on them by clients' drug use. Many programs have already begun this process. Such a process will also identify new roles and relationships for the drug treatment service system that create more integrated links for people moving between different service systems.



Challenge

TO STRENGTHEN THE OVERALL CAPACITY OF THE TREATMENT SYSTEM THROUGH DEVELOPMENT OF ENHANCED PHARMACOTHERAPY SERVICES AND MORE COHESIVE APPROACHES TO MEETING THE COMPLEX AND MULTIPLE SERVICE NEEDS OF DRUG USERS.

Response

Enhancing the treatment service system is a critical requirement if the current drug problem is to be reduced. The treatment service system involves general practitioners (particularly those providing methadone), the generic health and welfare service system, and a range of specialist treatment services. All have critical roles and will need additional assistance in future.

The police also have a critical role through their general policing and crime prevention roles but particularly through the development of the Drug Diversion Program.

The Committee believes attention needs to be paid to the development of a more sophisticated pharmacotherapy service based on the existing methadone program. Further investment will be essential if the methadone program is to continue its necessary expansion. If the anticipated new pharmacotherapies become available in the near future, further system development will also be required.

The current specialist service system will have to develop to accommodate the needs of an increasingly complex population. It will need to provide the practical, technical and consulting support services that will be required by other components of the social infrastructure and to better link with the pharmacotherapy services. Changes to program structure, funding and accountability arrangements will be needed. Different service delivery arrangements will also be required to achieve the integrated model advocated by the Committee. Particular attention will have to be paid to workforce development strategies in light of the demands that will be made on this sector.

The needs of vulnerable young people and those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds will only be met through a very focused and considered effort.

Challenge

TO DEVELOP A SUSTAINED AND COMMUNITY WIDE APPROACH TO REINTEGRATING DRUG USERS WHO WISH TO DEVELOP LIFESTYLES NOT DEPENDENT ON A DRUG USING CULTURE.

Response

Dependent drug use almost invariably leads to people becoming disconnected from many parts of the community including family, education, housing and employment. Many people become part of a sustaining drug subculture. Treatment is only the first step toward overcoming dependence. Strengthening and/or rebuilding personal capacities and constructive social connections is important at all stages of tackling the problems of drug users and hence must be an integral component of the drug strategy.

A comprehensive approach requires reintegration strategies that actively support drug users to re-establish meaningful relationships with family, education and employment. Such strategies will involve gaining access to housing, income support and other community services. Creating these pathways will mean changing the specialist treatment systems and reforming other services within the social infrastructure. More responsive Commonwealth policies are also important. Supporting drug users along that pathway will require many partnerships involving government, business and community groups.

Challenge

TO DEVELOP AN EFFECTIVE APPROACH TO REDUCING DRUG-RELATED DEATHS.

Response

Overdose deaths, largely as a result of heroin use, are unacceptable. Renewed efforts must be made to reduce the fatal and non-fatal overdose events and the community disturbance that results from current patterns of drug use. Particular effort needs to be made in those communities affected by heavy street usage, but attention must also be paid to the needs of communities where the effect of current drug use is less visible.

The Committee proposes an integrated local and statewide strategy for saving lives that includes:

- developing self-care training and support programs that encourage drug users to better care for themselves and their peers;
- encouraging greater outreach by professional staff to build working and supportive relationships with drug users to provide greater information and advice, and to link users to treatment and support services wherever possible;
- expanding the range of services and places that provide support and assistance in ways that drug users find attractive;
- providing health care services in places and ways that are relevant to drug users to improve their general health;
- building upon the work of the Metropolitan Ambulance Service to provide better and more sustained recovery services to reduce overdose and respond when they happen;
- improving linkages between services and operating arrangements, and developing cultures that are accepting of current drug users; and
- improving relationships with all frontline services, particularly the police.

These elements of the strategy will require substantial collaboration between agencies such as needle and syringe services, community health and drug treatment agencies. Arrangements to ensure more effective disposal of injecting equipment, for example, will be required. New approaches to working directly with drug users will be needed.

Police action should also be shaped by an awareness of the priority of saving lives. Police are important partners in any local drug strategy.

Challenge

TO ENSURE THE DRUG STRATEGY EFFECTIVELY DEALS WITH COMMUNITY CONCERNS ABOUT PUBLIC NUISANCE AND SAFETY.

Response

Over the last few years, changes that have occurred to the patterns of drug use have increased the exposure of many people to drug use in their community. It is critical that steps be taken to reduce these impacts, and to ensure that people are able to lead safe, secure lives and to go about their business without being disturbed by drug use, drug dealing and injecting equipment litter.

Strategies for prevention, community mobilisation (in the context of local drug strategies) and for saving lives outlined above make important contributions to achieving this goal. Policing is also a critical part of the strategy to reduce drug use and harm. The Committee affirms the importance of Local Priority Policing and the Drug Diversion Programs as major developments in the drug strategy that need to be linked to other initiatives at the local level. One of the important tasks of the next phase of drug strategy is to further develop the relationships between police, community agencies and drug users. Continued development and refinement of harm minimisation related to law enforcement is encouraged.

The effective operation of the children's and adult courts and the corrections system is also important in ensuring that the community is safe. Such institutions can help to tackle drug use by responding to the particular needs of drug users in ways that can help break a chronic cycle of involvement in the criminal justice system. More attention needs to be paid to supporting the courts in these functions, and in providing the backup services required to implement appropriate court orders. Reforms in community corrections, juvenile justice services and prisons are also required.

Challenge

TO MAKE STRATEGIES FOR TACKLING DRUGS MORE RESPONSIVE TO THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY, PARTICULARLY TO DIVERSE CULTURES AND CHANGING CIRCUMSTANCES.

Response

Drug use and misuse affects all parts of our society. The overall strategy must be responsive to the wide range of needs that exist in different places in different age groups, and in culturally and linguistically diverse communities. No single approach is appropriate for all situations.

Diverse communities do not have fundamentally different kinds of drug issues: rather, all communities share core needs in relation to prevention, treatment and law enforcement. Some communities have particular needs or are more exposed because of social exclusion. This may be a consequence of language problems or the migrant or refugee experience that may lead to inter-generational conflict. Actions that will be required include:

- culturally specific components in drug information and education strategies that provide facts about drugs and explain harm minimisation, and that assist families to address cultural and generational issues. This will also involve working with community leaders and ethnic media;
- development of formal working arrangements between drug services and ethnic welfare services. This should include formal protocols on referral, support and other matters; and
- improved communication within the law enforcement system.

The impact of drug use on the Koori community is perhaps more significant given the health and economic deficits it faces. The consequences of loss through overdose death or drug-related accidents are substantial. It is particularly important that collaboration is developed between the Koori community and mainstream services, and that evidence-based and culturally relevant practices are encouraged.

Koori-specific approaches to prevention and enhancing community-controlled health organisations and cooperatives are required so that they can develop interventions as part of their programs. Existing Koori drug and alcohol services funded by Commonwealth and State Governments require further support. Particular attention also needs to be paid to the needs of the large number of Koori people who come into contact with the law enforcement system.

The Committee believes that a Koori perspective is required in the Government's drug policy management team. The Government also needs to work with Koori peak bodies in health, justice and education to strengthen the overall support given to Koori communities dealing with every aspect of the drug problem.

Challenge

TO IMPROVE THE SKILL BASE AND SUPPORT PROVIDED FOR THE DRUG STRATEGY.

Response

The community's response to the drug problem can be characterised as a complex range of services that deal with changing circumstances. The capacity of all elements of government to deal with drug issues needs to be strengthened. To do this attention needs to be paid to:

- ongoing policy development. Internal mechanisms to do this exist within the Government and an independent statutory body is required that can engage with the community on drug issues, contribute to monitoring, research and evaluation, and provide high-level strategic advice to the Government on drug reform;
- workforce development. The Committee believes considerable attention must be paid to developing the skill base and mix across the full range of services supporting people with a drug-related problem;
- monitoring and evaluation. The drug strategy is now large and the objectives specified are complex. It is vital that the community and the Government are aware of the degree of effectiveness of drug programs, and are able to take early action to ensure that effective programs are maintained;
- research. Drug policy is also an area where much remains to be learned. The Committee proposes that a comprehensive research program be developed, and that a more proactive approach be taken to attracting research funds from many sources; and
- program coordination. Drug policy is necessarily implemented by a diverse range of State government, local government and non-government agencies. Improved coordination arrangements are required.

The Committee believes the challenges facing us all from the use and misuse of drugs require new ways of thinking, new approaches, and a real commitment to change. The following recommendations provide a framework for meeting these challenges.



Recommendations Drugs of all kinds have the capacity to cause harm to users, family and the community. Misuse of illegal drugs is now having an impact on the fabric of society. Government and the community must meet the challenge together. *The committee recommends:*



Recommendation 1

1 That the Victorian Government implement a comprehensive strategy to tackle the impact of drugs in partnership with the community.

The Committee wishes to ensure drug policy continues to focus on the harm that results from drug use regardless of legal status.

➔ Recommendation 1.1

That the Government affirm that the strategy will:

- maintain an integrated approach to legal and illegal drugs;
- be based upon health-promotion and harm-minimisation principles; and
- reflect the broad impact of drugs on the full range of the government's social policies and services.

The Committee believes the impact of drug misuse will only be reduced when the full range of services that assist people affected by drugs are able to do this effectively while continuing to provide their core services. Changes in usage patterns and levels of use are placing increasing burdens on a wide range of services operated or supported by the State Government. Many government-funded programs have the capacity to contribute to the drug prevention strategy and to reintegration of drug users if program redesign is carefully crafted. The Committee believes a concerted effort is required to more effectively support these services.

➔ Recommendation 1.2

That the Government require that all relevant State-funded programs reassess program design, staffing and other arrangements to ensure they are able to meet the consequences of increased drug use on their service user group.

➔ Recommendation 1.3

That the Government ensure necessary drug information and expertise is available to support program reassessments.

➔ Recommendation 1.4

That the Government strengthen existing initiatives that create linkages between programs and services in order to reduce the barriers to meeting the needs of service users.

The Committee believes the policy and strategy requirements of the diverse Victorian community have not been adequately met. More targeted and culturally relevant responses are needed.

➔ Recommendation 1.5

That the Government, in consultation with the Koori community and relevant peak bodies, resource and support the development of a Koori Drug Strategy as an integrated yet identifiable component of the overall drug strategy.

➔ Recommendation 1.6

That the Government ensure that all elements of the drug strategy:

- are responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of the community;
- provide opportunities for communities to be engaged in drug issues in culturally appropriate ways; and
- are adequately resourced.

A central element of the Government's drug policy focuses on saving the lives of drug users. This is a critical element of the drug strategy given the current overdose rates, and one that, to date, has been underdeveloped and fragmented. The Committee believes much more should be done within the areas affected and across the State. Specific proposals are included here, but it should be noted that saving lives is a responsibility of all aspects of drug policy.

➔ Recommendation 1.7

That the Government introduce a comprehensive 'saving lives' strategy designed to:

- provide health, welfare and emergency service support to high-risk drug users and the communities in which they live;
- strengthen local partnerships with and between educational, police, health, treatment and needle and syringe programs; and
- involve the relevant community in dealing with the issues that affect them.

The long-term success of drug policy depends upon its ability to prevent use, care for users, and assist those who have become dependent and involved in the drug culture to be reintegrated into normal community life through access to education, employment, housing and social support. The State and Commonwealth Governments have key roles to play here, as do the business community, local government and other community organisations.

➔ Recommendation 1.8

That the Government, in partnership with local government, business and community organisations, develop a strategy to establish:

- education;
- employment access and support; and
- related services

that reintegrate current and former dependent drug users into the community.

➔ Recommendation 1.9

That the Government strongly advocate changes to the income security and employment policies of the Commonwealth Government to ensure vulnerable young people and dependent drug users are effectively supported to access basic income, housing and employment opportunities.

Prevention Discouraging people commencing use, reducing experimentation and increasing the safety of those who continue to use is critical. The implementation of a comprehensive, integrated and sustained prevention strategy is one of the most essential requirements of a more effective drug strategy. The Committee believes that 10 per cent of the drug budget should be committed to prevention strategies.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government introduce a comprehensive drug prevention strategy that recognises the critical role community services perform, and the need for a range of drug-specific initiatives involving government and community organisations.

The critical role of communities in tackling the drug problem directly and more generally in providing safe, secure and supportive places for children and families has been emphasised in the research and in consultations.

➔ Recommendation 2.1

The Committee reaffirms the recommendation made in its Stage One report that the Government commit itself to a community mobilisation strategy.

There is a need to develop a sustained communication strategy on drugs that informs and educates all members of the community. The strategy should be developed over several years and priority should be given to cannabis, given its status as the most used illegal drug. Particular attention should also be paid to the needs of diverse language and cultural communities. The strategy must have the capacity to deal with all drugs and their risks, and to build over time.

➔ Recommendation 2.2

That the Government participate in a comprehensive and multifaceted drug communication strategy designed to:

- *provide information to the community about drugs; and*
- *engage the community in tackling the issue.*

The communication strategy should:

- *involve targeted use of mass media, other media and direct community contact;*
- *involve the community and identified target groups in better understanding drug issues;*
- *give early attention to explaining the risks of excessive and hazardous cannabis use to young people; and*
- *support all other elements of the drug strategy in an appropriate manner.*

Parents play a vital role in preventing drug problems and face great difficulties when they arise. Better equipping parents with the skills and knowledge to deal with drug issues is important in its own right, and will contribute to a generally more competent next generation. Parents can be participants in, and providers of, information, education and skills development. Parents also need support if their family is directly affected.

➔ Recommendation 2.3

That the Government support an extensive education, information, support and skills development strategy for parents that includes a range of approaches designed to appeal to different groups, be relevant to children of different ages, and which links to school and community-based strategies.

The education system is the social institution that, after families, has the greatest opportunity to affect children, adolescents and young adults. Drug prevention programs are now seen as a core part of school life. This is a significant gain that needs to be sustained and linked to the overall prevention strategy. The Committee wants to make the education process educationally and socially meaningful and supportive for all young people. Recent reports to the Government provide the framework for systemic responses that the Committee would endorse.

➔ Recommendation 2.4

That the Government implement reforms to the education system to strengthen the capacity of school and other educational environments to provide supportive environments for all students and, in so doing:

- *strengthen the overall welfare framework;*
- *provide systematic support through an enhanced youth support service for schools that focuses upon improved learning outcomes for all students;*
- *monitor the social climate of schools; and*
- *continue to provide systematic support for effective drug prevention programs through ongoing curriculum development, staff training and whole-school planning.*

Some young people will continue to be vulnerable, marginalised and, in some cases, come into contact with the child protection and legal systems. These young people can be made vulnerable by early drug use, or drug use can commence as a response to the circumstances in which the young person finds themselves. A more systematic approach is required to working with these young people.

Recommendation 2.5

That State and local governments implement an integrated approach to supporting vulnerable young people. It should focus on providing continuing support for children and adolescents who have been affected either by parental or personal drug use, and proactively support them to:

- *stay at or return to school;*
- *move into higher education, TAFE, apprenticeships or work; and*
- *engage in positive social and recreational activities not related to drug use.*

Prevention involves reducing the damage done by drug use, including that done to dependent users. An integrated strategy that works directly with these people is urgently needed in areas affected by heavy street usage and across the State.

Recommendation 2.6

That the Government work with drug users to implement a strategy designed to reduce use and misuse and which:

- *actively involves current users in reducing the harm they do themselves and others;*
- *links current drug users to health, welfare and treatment services; and*
- *supports the saving lives strategy outlined in recommendation 1.7.*

Prevention of drug use and misuse has been given lower priority than other areas of the drug strategy. The reforms recommended in this report will require particular support if they are to be effective.

Recommendation 2.7

That the Government establish a highly skilled team to provide technical and program support to major prevention initiatives. Priority should be given to supporting the educational reforms, parent support initiatives and other initiatives at the local level.

Recommendation 2.8

That the Government support the above initiatives through:

- *establishing a prevention planning committee that involves senior staff from all relevant government departments;*
- *instituting regular processes to ensure the voice of youth is heard in drug policy and strategy implementation; and*
- *establishing a clearing house to disseminate information about effective drug prevention strategies in association with the resource team proposed in recommendation 2.7.*

Treatment and support The health and social consequences of sustained drug use are serious and long lasting. The State needs a range of services that are capable of providing proactive intervention and support at the earliest opportunity, meeting the general health needs of drug users, and providing specialist treatment for those with more serious problems. The specialist services also have an obligation to provide professional advice and technical support to other service providers.

Recommendation 3

3 That the Victorian Government continue the development of treatment services and give priority to the further linkage of early intervention, specialist treatments and mainstream service providers, the development of pharmacotherapy services, and the rehabilitation and reintegration of drug users.

Increased recognition needs to be given to the importance of early intervention in people's drug using and the role general practitioners can play in this area.

➔ Recommendation 3.1

That the Government work with the Commonwealth Government and Divisions of General Practice to enhance the effectiveness of general practitioners in interventions in drug-related issues, and their willingness to participate in the pharmacotherapy service.

Opiate dependence causes widespread concern to the community. Provision of methadone is a core of the treatment plan for many of these people. Growth in the system in recent years has placed substantial strain on providers and dispensers and so, for some people, the service is less than optimal. Important research done in this State on alternative pharmacotherapies means there is now the potential to establish an integrated pharmacotherapy service over the next few years. This integrated service will have to be able to sustain continued growth in the order of 15 per cent over each of the next three to five years. Further research is also required in this area and should include preparation for a future formal prescribed heroin trial.

➔ Recommendation 3.2

That the Government introduce departmental and service delivery arrangements that seek to ensure every drug user, for whom it is appropriate, has access to methadone or other pharmacotherapies and is supported by the specialist treatment system.

➔ Recommendation 3.3

That the Government undertake a systematic review of prescriber and dispenser arrangements with each General Practice Division and local pharmacists to:

- *identify strategies that will increase prescribing and dispensing to enable continued methadone program growth; and*
- *prepare for the introduction of additional pharmacotherapies.*

➔ Recommendation 3.4

That the Government initiate discussions with the Commonwealth Government about long-term support for the pharmacotherapy service. This should include funding support for methadone and new pharmacotherapies.

➔ Recommendation 3.5

That the Government enhance training for pharmacotherapy providers to strengthen the current service and prepare for the introduction of new pharmacotherapies.

➔ Recommendation 3.6

That the Government commission the preparation of a revised and updated heroin trial design, and give consideration to taking a leadership role in establishing a trial as soon as circumstances make this possible.

Safe dispensing of methadone requires very regular attendance at community pharmacies. Other pharmacotherapies will also require routine attendance. The cost burden for this currently falls on the former drug user. This can be a disincentive, particularly for those at the beginning of the program, or whose age limits their capacity to earn an income.

Recommendation 3.7

That the Government introduce a program to reduce the cost to drug users of receiving methadone. The subsidy should meet the full cost for all those aged under 18 years, all who are subject to juvenile justice orders, and the first eight weeks for adults on the program.

In recent years, there has been substantial growth and improved capacity in specialist treatment services. The key priorities for the future should be providing the existing service system with the capacity to more effectively deal with the complex needs of service users, integrating the pharmacotherapy services, and supporting non-specialist services in their dealings with people affected by drug use.

Recommendation 3.8

That the Government refocus the specialist drug treatment program structure to provide for:

- *simple, short-term and one-off treatment episodes;*
- *flexible pathways through all stages of treatment, and rehabilitation and reintegration for drug clients with complex and social deficits and needs; and*
- *formalised links between pharmacotherapies and all drug treatment services.*

Recommendation 3.9

That the Government undertake regional planning reviews to:

- *introduce regional assessment and referral arrangements that facilitate the provision of integrated client services; and*
- *ensure pharmacotherapy provision is directly linked with other treatment services.*

Recommendation 3.10

That the Government ensure funding (unit costs) and accountability (service agreements) arrangements be amended to accommodate the revised service framework proposed and the different cost structures for providers that will result from creating improved career structures.

Recommendation 3.11

That the Government support accreditation of funded alcohol and drug treatment services, against standards developed for the purpose, by a registered accreditation body as part of a quality assurance strategy.

Recommendation 3.12

That the Government ensure that the broader health and welfare service system have the support of the specialist drug treatment services through specialist consultancy; technical advice and support services.

Recommendation 3.13

That the Government ensure the specific needs of women are considered in treatment service planning by:

- *making available gender-specific treatment options; and*
- *facilitating access to child care as required.*

Young people experiencing difficulties as a result of substance misuse are a key priority. Improved services have been developed in recent years. Attention to the needs of young people leaving the juvenile justice system is required and to those who are homeless.

Recommendation 3.14

That the Government establish a working group to build on the Youth Substance Abuse Service and to consider additional models for providing drug treatment specifically to young people.

Recommendation 3.15

That the Government set aside a proportion of new public and community housing acquisitions for young people and adults seeking to reintegrate into the community whilst dealing with the consequences of drug dependence, including people recently released from prisons or youth training centres and who are otherwise unable to secure stable, affordable accommodation.

Recommendation 3.16

That the Government ensure community agencies directly involved in working with vulnerable young people and young offenders are supported to provide counselling and assistance directly rather than brokered through separate organisations.

It is important that the Government moves to correct the mismatch between community expectations about drug treatment, and the research outcomes that indicate drug dependence is a chronic relapsing condition most likely to require multiple treatment episodes. The drug treatment system is now a complex and diverse service that requires considerable support.

Recommendation 3.17

That the Government develops strategies aimed at increasing the level of understanding of drug users, their families/significant others and the general community about drug dependence, drug treatment services and the drug treatment process.

Criminal justice and law enforcement The role of law enforcement in dealing with drug issues has traditionally received particular emphasis, both in policy and resource terms. While a stronger focus on prevention, treatment and capacity building is now appropriate, the law enforcement system remains central to an effective drug strategy.

Recommendation 4

4 That the Victorian Government continue to acknowledge the important role that all components of the criminal justice system play in an overall harm-minimisation strategy.

Victoria Police has demonstrated a strong commitment to harm minimisation, local and State partnerships and continued vigilance in tackling commercial and serious trafficking while actively diverting drug users from the system. The development of the drug diversion initiative is a major achievement that will be critical in assisting drug users and reducing the load on courts and corrections systems in the future.

➔ Recommendation 4.1

That a Victoria Police reference group be established involving senior police, health and other representatives to:

- provide advice about the implications of new directions and strategy;
- review the overall drug strategy of Victoria Police; and
- provide advice on indicators to be used by police to monitor and inform police drug efforts.

➔ Recommendation 4.2

That Victoria Police ensure local drug law enforcement operational policies and strategies are discussed on a regular basis with relevant agencies. This will ensure operational decision making is well informed and, where appropriate, that backup support is provided by these agencies.

➔ Recommendation 4.3

That regional commanders within Victoria Police ensure:

- drug law enforcement strategies are monitored to ensure that negative impacts do not occur in other areas; and
- strategies that reduce the harm from drugs are implemented across districts.

➔ Recommendation 4.4

That Victoria Police continues to invest in harm-minimisation training, and monitors and appraises members' performance following training. The investment should continue to include members at all levels of the force.

The importance of community involvement in drug-related issues and crime prevention has been emphasised in this report, as it was in the Committee's Stage One report. So too has the role of local government in facilitating local planning. Police involvement in these community-based initiatives is vital.

➔ Recommendation 4.5

That local government establish a community-based forum focused upon drugs, community safety and crime prevention in which police and other stakeholders participate where such a forum does not currently exist.

Victoria has provided leadership in the development of diversion programs and the courts have an important role in these programs. The level of drug-related crime means the courts will continue to have to deal with a large number of complex cases that cannot be diverted. It is important that the courts are well supported to meet their justice responsibilities through sound legislation and effective technical and other support services.

➔ Recommendation 4.6

That the Government continues to develop the range and number of programs that link drug-dependent defendants with appropriate support services including drug-specific, general health, accommodation and employment services.

➔ Recommendation 4.7

That the Government support the phased establishment of an integrated court drug program in the Magistrates' Court. The program should:

- enhance magistrates' specialist knowledge of drug issues relevant to their responsibilities;
- improve targeting of assessment and court support services;
- enhance linkage to relevant community support services; and
- increase supervision by the court of the offenders' compliance with the program commensurate with the level of risk of each offender.



Recommendation 4.8

That the Government commission an independent review of its diversion programs including COATS and CREDIT in 2002.

The courts are dealing with a growing number of drug-related cases and many involve increasingly complex challenges. The courts depend on the social infrastructure in many ways and their dependence needs to be recognised.

Recommendation 4.9

That the Government ensure appropriate accommodation and support facilities are available to people with drug problems who would otherwise be refused bail, and that special provision is made for young people.

Increased misuse of drugs, high numbers of arrests compared with other States and revised sentencing laws mean the corrections system is facing increasing demand. Current service provision arrangements are clearly inadequate.

Recommendation 4.10

That the Government ensure the Community Corrections Service has the resources and the breadth and depth of skills required to meet the needs of drug-using offenders.

Recommendation 4.11

That Victoria Police, the Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner and the Department of Human Services establish a system that will enable the health records of defendants and offenders to travel with them during their time in the custody of police and the adult corrections and juvenile justice services.

Recommendation 4.12

That the Government support the proposed major initiatives of the Office of the Correctional Services Commissioner in relation to a prison drug strategy, and the development of new initiatives in its drug strategy in the juvenile justice system. In particular, those which:

- *make available appropriate and consistent drug treatment programs including methadone and other pharmacotherapies;*
- *render unnecessary multiple assessments;*
- *incorporate active and appropriate harm-reduction strategies such as needle and syringe services; and*
- *seek to reduce drug use of prisoners.*

The effectiveness of the response to drugs is, in part, affected by the legal arrangements established by the Government. The legal regime affects prevention, treatment and law enforcement systems and needs regular review.

Recommendation 4.13

That in the context of the current review of the Sentencing Act 1991, the Government consider the potential role of deferred and suspended sentences for those who have committed drug-related offences, conditional upon them attending drug treatment and relevant supporting programs.

Recommendation 4.14

That the Government repeal section 75 of the Drugs Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981.

Recommendation 4.15

That the Government undertake a review of the Alcoholic and Drug-dependent Persons Act 1968.

There is increasing evidence that cannabis has a therapeutic benefit for people suffering from a small number of conditions such as advanced cases of cancer and AIDS. There is renewed interest worldwide and rigorous scientific trials are being conducted in the United Kingdom and elsewhere. While awaiting the outcome of the trials, some discretion should be used by Victoria Police and the courts.

Recommendation 4.16

That Victoria Police and the courts use their discretion when dealing with people using cannabis to manage the symptoms of serious, debilitating and often terminal conditions for which there are indications of therapeutic effect.

Supporting and developing the drug strategy Government initiatives and leadership are essential to the development of a drug strategy that has the capacity to respond to the extent and complexity of the problem. However, government initiatives alone will be insufficient. Local government, business, community organisations and individuals all have critically important roles to play. One of the State Government's most important roles is to encourage, support and resource the effective engagement of the community in drug issues.

Recommendation 5

5 Recommendation 5.1

That the Government continue to support the community's and local government's roles in drug strategy.

The range of services and agencies involved in drug issues is necessarily large and diverse. It is important to recognise that the infrastructure supporting drug strategy has been outgrown by recent changes and a more comprehensive underpinning is required. Complex challenges are still to be met. Particular challenges will have to be met if the new services proposed and the revised arrangements outlined in this report are to be established and work effectively.

The Committee recommends:

5 Recommendation 5.2

That the Victorian Government ensure the drug strategy is supported by an adequate investment in workforce development, research, monitoring, evaluation and ongoing policy development.

Ensuring that the drug strategy is effective requires policy monitoring and review. External input to policy making and implementation is required. This process can also provide critical information to the community and key stakeholders about emerging issues, and help in maintaining an informed community debate on drug issues. The partnership between the Government and the community that has been advocated throughout this report should include a close working relationship between the Government and an independent body that collaborates in supporting implementation of the drug strategy.

5 Recommendation 5.3

That the Government support the establishment of an independent statutory body to assist in the implementation of the drug strategy by:

- *advising the Government on ongoing options for drug policy reform;*
- *supporting the engagement of the community in informed discussion regarding drug matters; and*
- *advising on the monitoring, research and evaluation strategies required.*

Skilled and flexible workforces will be required in many health, welfare, education, court and justice services if the challenge of dealing with drugs more effectively is to be met. This includes those involved in prevention as well as the various intervention services. Senior managers and operating staff need to be assisted to more effectively deal with drug issues as part of their routine work.

5 Recommendation 5.4

That the Government require the preparation and implementation of consistent workforce development strategies that seek to ensure:

- *there is a highly skilled and competent specialist service workforce supporting those most affected by substance misuse; and*
- *relevant staff in all social infrastructure programs are equipped with the necessary range and levels of competencies to deal with drug issues.*

5 Recommendation 5.5

That priority be given to:

- *expanding and better resourcing postgraduate training opportunities in addiction-related studies for relevant disciplines including medicine;*
- *ensuring salary and other incentives are provided to attract skilled staff into roles involving work with people affected by substance use;*
- *introducing basic training requirements for staff in drug and alcohol services;*
- *providing induction training for new staff within the treatment system given the service expansion;*
- *providing special training for operational police, particularly those likely to directly interface with drug use and dealing; and*
- *supporting ongoing and integrated in-service training and development across generalist and specialist providers at the regional level.*

Developing and maintaining effective service systems and recognising the impacts of, and gaps in, service systems requires regular and rigorous data gathering, monitoring and evaluation. Strategies for these functions need to balance the routine requirements of managers and the need for a wholistic system-wide picture. These needs are statewide, regional and local.

Recommendation 5.6

That an assessment is made of the data required to monitor and manage the drug strategy. Key areas for inclusion in an enhanced and integrated monitoring strategy are:

- *data required to monitor Victorian and local drug trends and dynamics;*
- *data required to monitor drug trends nationally and internationally;*
- *strategies for gathering and assessing information about best practice models; and*
- *assessment of the effectiveness of the service responses.*

Recommendation 5.7

That the Government support the preparation of a drug policy evaluation strategy, in conjunction with the body recommended in 5.3, that:

- *focuses on critical areas of policy and strategy;*
- *emphasises the need for outcome evaluation; and*
- *recognises the cross-policy imperatives of the drug strategy.*

Recommendation 5.8

That the Government support and encourage the development of national monitoring and evaluation strategies that provide a comparative basis for assessing drug effort and effectiveness.

In a policy area as diverse, complex and rapidly changing as drugs, research is a key priority. Research is needed to inform practice and the development of services within the current policy framework, and to provide material that can also be used to inform new policy.

Recommendation 5.9

That the Government support, in conjunction with the body recommended in 5.3, a research strategy in consultation with relevant stakeholders that:

- *establishes State priorities;*
- *focuses on applied research;*
- *attracts funding for State priorities from a range of research funding and community bodies; and*
- *ensures effective dissemination of the research results.*

