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TITLE: Sensationalism no way to fight drug addiction

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Drugs policy arouses strong emotions. People see drug users and fear the unknown. The traditional response from politicians, particularly conservatives, has been to exploit these fears for political gain. The outcome has been an over-reliance on law enforcement as a means of stamping out both the supply and use of harmful drugs.

In 2003, the House of Representatives standing committee on family and community affairs inquired into drug abuse and produced a report that was in keeping with the history of drug policy. It called for the abandonment of harm minimisation as the principal objective of the National Drug Strategy. The committee wanted prevention and abstinence-based treatment to be the focus of government policy.

This position is partially reflected in the Federal Government's "tough on drugs" policy. Penalties have been increased for drug offences, funding has been increased for drug law enforcement, the Government has run several prevention campaigns based on dramatic images of the dangers associated with drug use and money has been directed to abstinence-based treatment services. All the while, harm reduction and other treatment services have remained chronically under-funded.

Given this history, the recently released report on amphetamines and other synthetic drugs by the federal Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Australian Crime Commission is a brave document.

Most notably, in contrast to the report from the House of Representatives Standing Committee, the committee unanimously supported harm minimisation and recommended that "harm-reduction strategies and programs receive more attention and resources".

In its conclusions, the committee said "prohibition, while theoretically a logical and properly intentioned strategy, is not effective". It also argued that "the current national approach to illicit drugs - supply reduction, demand reduction and harm reduction - will achieve greater outcomes if a better balance between these approaches can be reached". In common parlance, this means there should be less emphasis on law enforcement and more on education and drug treatment.

Unfortunately, it is a rare event when any government body decides to make drug policy recommendations that are based on evidence. The report was not received warmly by the Government.

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs has also launched another drug-related inquiry, seemingly to counter the recommendations made by the joint committee. And in its recent hearings, the chairwoman of the committee, Bronwyn Bishop, attacked representatives from the Department of Health for publishing documents containing harm minimisation messages, saying "this document is full of harm minimisation. The Prime Minister said that he is opposed to harm minimisation and that we do not have it."

Professor Margaret Hamilton, a respected drug expert with more than 30 years' experience in the field, received a particularly harsh broadside for also using this type of terminology, as well as for making the sensible observation that moral considerations have historically played too great a role in drug debates.

Bishop is on a mission to ensure the Government's drug prevention programs are sensationalised, going as far as calling for a campaign based on the message that "this is going to scramble your brains".

In this climate, the Government's drug policy is unlikely to change markedly in response to the joint committee's recommendations. Yet the members of the committee have signalled that there are now politicians from across the political spectrum prepared to listen and act on the evidence.

It is hoped there will come a time when enough politicians recognise that drug use disorders are a health problem that cannot be solved by harsh drug laws or sensationalised advertising.

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