



NSPs have saved tax payers 7.7 billion.  
L-R: David Voon, John Ryan, Senator Brett Mason, Prof David Penington & Amanda Milledge.

# 360° Take on Illegal Drugs & Mental Health

The Anex Illegal Drugs and Mental Health Conference brought together more than 400 people from across the spectrum of organisations facing the challenge of helping people who face the dual challenge of illegal drugs and mental health issues to discuss how their organisations are coping with the challenge and what they need to do to improve outcomes.

John Ryan, CEO of Anex, said: 'Bringing the drug and mental health sectors together at the conference presents a unique opportunity to devise practical and pragmatic strategies to end the co-morbidity merry-go-round where people receiving treatment for drug use find it difficult to access complementary treatment for their co-morbid mental health issues and vice versa.'

Professor David Penington, former Chair of the National AIDS taskforce and Anex Patron, told the conference: 'There is a need to think outside of the silo approach... and to embrace innovation and flexibility. Too often though, addressing illicit drug issues and mental health are treated as two separate pathways for action.'

From her personal experience as a carer, Jo Buchanan argued that: 'The only way we can stop the merry-go-round... is for hospitals or institutions to provide treatment for both problems simultaneously in the form of resident, inpatient care. And after release... the treatment must be continued as an outpatient service according to each individual's need. Anything less would be a waste of time and money.'

At the closing plenary, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing, Senator

Brett Mason, noted that the conference heard many stories that illustrated the need for greater collaboration between the mental health and drug and alcohol sectors and in working with consumers and carers.

The findings of the conference, he said, will be useful for expert working group deliberations under the National Co-morbidity Initiative.

Senator Mason also acknowledged carers, saying: 'The knowledge and experiences of families who are long-term primary carers for people with co-morbid disorders are often overlooked. Families reported that current services often did not work with them and very few appreciated the impact that caring for someone with co-morbidity had on families and other carers.'

In recognition of this, the Australian Government, the principal sponsor of the conference, launched a new resource at the conference to help ensure that people with a mental health problem and a drug and alcohol problem, and their carers, are involved in the treatment process: 'The Consumer and Carer Involvement in the Co-morbidity Treatment Planning Package'.

The conference coincided with the 21st birthday of Needle and Syringe Programs (NSPs) in Australia. To mark the occasion Anex presented delegates with a series of eight short films as a reminder of why NSPs were first introduced, the benefits of NSPs and how their services can be improved. One of the short films, entitled Winning the Public Debate, emphasised the need to focus on the evidence and was timely given the recent renewed debate on the existence of NSPs.

Speaking of evidence, Professor David Penington presented Senator Brett Mason with a symbolic cheque from Australia's NSP Network for \$7.7 billion, made out to Australian families, communities and taxpayers for HIV and HCV treatment costs saved by Needle and Syringe Programs. All this for an investment of \$130 million - an impressive rate of return.

Not resting on its laurels, the conference hosted a vibrant discussion about the future of NSPs in Australia: how services could and should be improved. Participants were reminded that despite the success of the program 'our control of HIV is fragile. We could lose control quite easily.' Accessibility for key sub-groups of people

who inject drugs was identified as another of the key challenges, particularly for people on the urban fringes and from indigenous backgrounds.

The international perspective on NSPs in prisons was provided by Xavier Majo Roca from Spain. He noted that since a large proportion of injecting drug users spend time in prison, the absence of NSPs in prison works against efforts in the community to contain the spread of blood-borne viruses. He dispelled many of the myths surrounding NSPs in prisons, noting that an evaluation of such programs in Europe showed, among other things, that syringes had never been used as a weapon and there had been no increase in drug use.

## Closing the Gap

How the health service can better respond to co-morbid illegal drug use and mental health issues. Page 3.

What is the case against NSPs in prison? Do the arguments stand up based on international evidence? Page 5.

## Locked Up Locked Out

## Happy 21st What's next?

Anex presented delegates with 8 short films to mark NSPs 21st (Page 6), but then got down to the business of asking what's next? Page 12.