

MEDIA RELEASE – 23 APRIL 2024

Second Melbourne injecting site scrapped: Penington Institute calls for more consultation in government's 'statewide action plan'.

Penington Institute has expressed its disappointment that the State Government will not follow through on its long-standing commitment to trial a second safe injecting facility in Melbourne.

But Penington Institute CEO John Ryan welcomed the government's decision to invest in a \$95.11 million 'statewide action plan' that includes wraparound support services in two CBD locations.

Mr Ryan warned, though, that failure to consult with the sector on the implementation of the plan, or any delays in bolstering support services would come at a cost of further lives.

"The evidence tells us that we can cut the number of overdoses and deaths when people have access to a medically supervised injecting site," Mr Ryan said.

"We know these facilities save lives, so on the back of this decision Victoria needs to ramp up its other compassionate and health-led responses as a matter of urgency.

"Overdose is a leading cause of death in Australia – it's higher than the road toll – but there are ways to prevent overdoses and prevent deaths. This is a really significant and growing issue, so we need to act now, and we need to act together.

"As a society we cannot keep putting band aids on a gaping wound."

Mr Ryan welcomed the government's decision to implement all of the other recommendations in Mr Lay's report, and to expand pharmacotherapy – which involves specialist drugs such as methadone and counselling services – at 30 locations across the state.

He urged the government to listen to the experts in the field and ensure that they steered investment where it is most needed, and without delay.

"Whether this response is big enough to meet the level of demand in the community will be seen in time," Mr Ryan said.

"Penington welcomes the prospect of a Victoria's first statewide strategy to address drug harms over the long term and urges government to take a partnership approach to the development of this strategy.

"The appointment of the Chief Advisor is a great step forward towards planning for lasting improvements in our system – but we shouldn't forget that AOD sector and the

community who uses our services are the experts here. We should be closely consulted on investment and policy priorities.”

Mr Ryan acknowledged that short-term actions are needed.

“What we do know is that the drug problem is getting worse in Victoria, and there is no time to waste with addressing that problem.”

Research shows that at least two people die of heroin overdoses in Melbourne’s CBD every month. In 2022, there were 230 Victorians who died of a heroin overdose, of whom 24 were in the CBD - the most of any local government area.

Heroin-related ambulance call-outs in the City of Melbourne have also increased in recent years.

The Australian Crime Intelligence Commission’s annual review last month revealed that Victorians used almost half of the estimated 999kg of heroin used nationally in the year to August 2023.

Mr Ryan chaired an independent panel that last year delivered the second independent review of the Medically Supervised Injecting Room (MSIR) in North Richmond.

That review found that in the first five years since its establishment in 2018, the MSIR trial in North Richmond had succeeded in achieving its central objective of saving lives. The review found there had been almost 6000 overdose events safely managed at the facility and up to 63 lives saved.

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Penington Institute is an independent public health non-profit organisation with expertise in drug policy, research and community education. For further information go to www.penington.org.au.

John Ryan is available for interview.

John Ryan is a leader in public health and safety and the inaugural CEO of Penington Institute. John actively works to promote sensible approaches to drug use in the community including with media and by providing expert advice including to governments.