

Ms Shelley McInnis

Inquiry Secretary

House of Representatives

Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs

Parliament House

CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Ms McInnis,

RE: PARLIAMENTARY INQUIRY INTO SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The Australian Association of Christian Schools (AACS) is a national association of over 240 Protestant Christian schools in every Australian State and Territory. These schools educate well in excess of 60,000 students.

AACS welcomes the invitation to respond to the above Parliamentary Inquiry into substance abuse. The focus of this response will be on the abuse of licit drugs, specifically alcohol and tobacco as well as the abuse of prescription and counter sales medications. The response does not take account of illicit drugs, eg. marijuana and heroin, as AACS, along with many other school organisations, has been involved in the Commonwealth's National Illicit Drug Strategy and, more specifically, the National School Drug Education Strategy. That Strategy has as its main focus the prevention and rehabilitation of those involved in the use of illicit drugs.

Australia has a cultural tolerance for alcohol. This cultural tolerance manifests itself in the acceptance of alcohol as a part of Australia's social life and economic wellbeing. The current campaign by brewers, "shout", designed to resist the GST on beer, is indicative of this cultural acceptance. Unfortunately, with widespread acceptance of alcohol comes abuse. There is widespread statistical evidence of increasing rates of alcohol consumption by young Australians including those legally under age and still at school. Associated with this abuse is the phenomenon of binge drinking, more often than not a characteristic of young and inexperienced consumers.

The abuse of alcohol, particularly by the young, often results in road accidents and death, violence, breakdown in family relationships and unanticipated and often unidentified occupational health and safety risks. Commonwealth and

State authorities have consistently over time and somewhat successfully, warned the entire population of the detrimental effects of the abuse of tobacco. Alcohol, however, seems to have been treated with "kid gloves". While its longterm health effects are still to be documented, there seems to be a reluctance to confront young people in particular and the wider community in general with the detrimental social, health and economic effects of the abuse of alcohol.

The restrictions imposed by Government via legislation on the tobacco industry have seen its disappearance from billboards and sporting arenas. It would appear, however, that girls and young women in particular, have not absorbed the message regarding the detrimental health effects of tobacco. A more realistic and targeted programme is needed to assist young women in resisting tobacco and in breaking the habit.

The abuse of prescription and counter sale medications is only now manifesting itself in the wider community. Organisations such as the AMA, in collaboration with the Government, need to vigilantly educate the medical profession and particularly GPs in prescribing drugs where alternative remedies may be more appropriate. The "placebo" effect of prescription drugs is often sufficient to get patients dependent/addicted to a particular drug. The sale of drugs across the counter should only be tolerated where it is pharmacologically known that the drug does not create dependence and does not have any detrimental side effects. All drugs listed by governments for subsidy should only be available via prescription. Drugs/medications known to have addictive qualities should also only be available via prescription. Over servicing is not a problem for doctors alone. Access to drugs across the counter or via the Internet can also lead to over servicing of "patients" with serious social and economic effects for themselves and their families.

Thank you for the invitation to respond to the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely,

PETER A CRIMMINS
Executive Officer, AACS