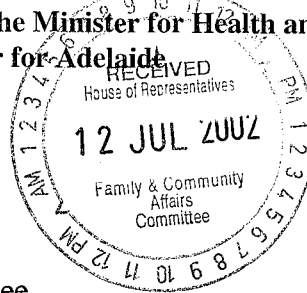




THE HON TRISH WORTH MP

Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and Ageing
Member for Adelaide



MAIL RECEIVED

1 JUL 2002

Mrs Kay Hull MP
Chair
House of Representatives Standing Committee
on Family and Community Affairs
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Mrs ~~Hull~~, *Kay*

Thank you for inviting me to comment on the discussion paper "*Where to Next? Inquiry into substance abuse in Australian communities*", released in September 2001 by the former House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Community Affairs.

I believe that the paper provides a good overview of the findings of the former Committee and indicates the breadth, diversity and complexity of issues surrounding substance misuse, including issues related to family relationships, health care, crime, violence and law enforcement, road trauma and workplace safety and productivity.

It is also evident that the former Committee undertook widespread consultations with organisations, groups and individuals all across Australia, and the richness of feedback they obtained from these diverse sources is reflected throughout the discussion paper. Of particular interest is the juxtaposition of reports from expert witnesses and researchers alongside reports from service providers at the coalface and personal accounts of experiences of drug related harm.

However, since the discussion paper was published, more information has become available. Recently, for example, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare released the First Results of the 2001 National Drug Strategy Household Survey. The Household Surveys are a valuable source of information on patterns and trends in drug use in Australia as well as providing insight into attitudes and behaviours in regard to drug use. I understand that the Department of Health and Ageing has provided the new Committee with copies of the report.

The report on the First Results of the 2001 Survey shows that the number of Australians who smoke tobacco daily has dropped over the last three years to 19.5% of the population aged 14 years or more. This is one of the lowest rates of smoking in the developed world. Over the same period there was a 23% drop in the proportion of people using illicit drugs such as marijuana, heroin, amphetamines and ecstasy, at some time in the last 12 months. Particularly encouraging was the decrease in the proportion of teenagers using these drugs in the previous 12 months, from 38% in 1998 down to 28% in 2001.

Encouraging though these results are, there is no room for complacency. Substance misuse continues to take a substantial toll on the health and wellbeing of our nation, particularly on our young people. That is why the recent Federal Budget made Tackling Drugs one of its priorities.

In that Budget the Government reaffirmed its commitment to the National Illicit Drug Strategy, announcing a number of new initiatives to help stem the tide of drug use. These include an additional \$14 million over four years for the Community Partnerships Initiative; \$27.5 million over four years to develop and introduce retractable needle and syringe technology and an additional \$1.2 million for the Croc Festivals.

In recent years there has been a renewal of prevention effort in drug policy, as evidenced by the decision by Ministerial Council on Drug Strategy in July 2001 to adopt the *National Drug Strategy Prevention Agenda*. The literature and evidence indicates that intervention in the early years of life can lead to a reduction in substance abuse later in life, and that an investment in the early years can lead to better health and social outcomes that translate into a reduction in disadvantage, delinquency and criminal behaviour.

The Prevention Agenda is an opportunity to take forward new prevention investments as one of the primary initiatives for future drug policy. Components of the agenda are a monograph regarding best practice in prevention of substance misuse problems, an accompanying national policy framework and a program of national action. These initiatives are currently under development and require the establishment of new partnerships, including with mental health and family and community services.

I note that the Inquiry into the substance abuse discussion paper is intended as the outcome of the first phase of the Inquiry and that the next phase was intended to entail a more focused investigation of national programs and to make recommendations on strategic approaches to substance misuse.

I was pleased to see the enthusiasm and commitment of the new Committee to take up the reins of the Inquiry and progress these issues. I look forward to seeing the outcomes of the next phase of the Inquiry and am more than willing to assist in any way I can with the Committee's work over the next few months.

Yours sincerely,



Trish Worth

26 JUN 2002