



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE DRUGS OF DEPENDENCE (PERSONAL USE)
AMENDMENT BILL 2021

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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the Drugs of Dependence
(Personal Use) Amendment Bill 2021

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Pharmacy Guild of Australia ACT Branch Submission June 2021

Introduction

The Pharmacy Guild - ACT Branch (The Guild) welcomes the opportunity to provide its submission to this consultation. This submission is prepared on behalf of the Pharmacy Guild - ACT Branch members. Members of the Guild are registered pharmacists and owners of community pharmacies in the ACT.

Pharmacists, particularly those working in community pharmacies are committed to harm minimisation practices and interventions and see the societal impacts from drugs on a daily basis.

The impact of drug-related harm in community pharmacies

The focus of pharmacists is prevention, intervention, and support for people in the community. Their role is to dispense and provide advice on dangerous drugs and medicines, as well as provide access to and management of the Opioid Replacement Program (Methadone Program) and support the Needle and Syringe program.

Of the 81 community pharmacies in the ACT, over half provide the methadone program to over 1,000 patients in total, most of which have become addicted to drugs when introduced to a 'minor' drug which then progressed to 'harder' and more addictive drugs.

The pharmacists experience firsthand the impact addiction has on the patient, their family, and the community. In recent years, many community pharmacies report to the Guild and police an increase in violent incidents in the pharmacies which threaten the safety of staff and other patients and the perpetrators are drug-affected. One incident reported recently involved a regular patient who walked into the dispensary, threatened staff by declaring she had a gun, and stole drugs from the dispensary.

Decriminalisation of dangerous drugs may increase use and therefore increase the presentation of people at treatment centres and pharmacies, and increase the burden on the Territory's resources over time.

The Guild does not support decriminalisation of drugs as proposed in the Amendment to the Bill but recommends that the ACT Government continue to focus on the current treatment and harm minimisation programs, and increase focus on early intervention and education programs.

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Current services

The ACT Government has put best practice measures in place in pharmacies which have demonstrated support for drug-affected people. These include:

- Investment in Real Time Prescription Monitoring technology for pharmacies to provide 'live' monitoring of prescriptions and dispensed Schedule 8 medicines to reduce potential for harm.
- For many years the ACT Government has actively supported pharmacies to provide the methadone program for patients who have been prescribed opioid replacement therapy by specialist GPs.
- The ACT Government provides peer support mechanisms and services through many organisations such as Directions and ATODA and facilitates committees through ACT Health for interested parties including consumers to enable an exchange of issues and solutions.
- In addition to these services, pharmacies provide needles and syringes at a low cost to encourage single use syringes by patients to reduce the spread of blood borne diseases such as hepatitis.
- Pharmacies initiate staged supply arrangements, usually at the request from the prescriber, for medicines to a patient over a period of time in instalments rather than supplying the full amount prescribed at the outset.

Recommendations

In addition to maintaining the current programs mentioned above, the Guild makes the following recommendations to the ACT Government based on Guild policies, expertise, and pharmacists' experience:

- Continued investment in current and proven harm minimisation initiatives which contribute to ameliorating the harms associated with drug use.
- initiate further education programs within the schools and community.
- ACT Govt Expansion of other known harm minimisation programs: needle and syringe
- There be resources allocated to conduct research and trials to develop clinically proven initiatives in the ACT, with support for successful in the community organisations, followed by evaluation.
- Increased work with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community and Linguistically Diverse Communities to ensure appropriate cultural treatment and advice is available.
- The ACT Government encourage programs with an integrated approach to ensure the patient is at the centre of care and receives support to enable them to live fully in society.
- Pharmacy staff and pharmacy patients have a right to be in a safe and violence-free environment and the Guild recommends that the ACT Government implement strategies to understand and address the resources required to deal with violent situations so that people feel safe when they come to work each day. This could be adequate security, changes to legislation to make it an offence to treat pharmacy staff with violence, and responsive police to attend incidents.

Harm minimisation does not condone illegal behaviours such as illicit drug use but acknowledges that these behaviours occur despite vigorous efforts to reduce the supply and demand of drugs. Consequently, authorities have a responsibility to develop and implement public health and law enforcement measures that contribute to reducing harm to individuals and the community caused by drug use. The Guild is concerned that the proposed amendments to the Bill is counter-productive to the aim of harm minimisation and will have flow-on health, social, economic, environmental and other consequences for drug-users, their families, workplaces, neighbourhoods and the broader community.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the inquiry. Please contact us at the Pharmacy Guild on 62708900 if you require any further information



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