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In reply please quote:

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MEDIA RELEASE

Drug law enforcement policy and its impact on the heroin market

Heroin seizures by law enforcement authorities exert no effect whatsoever on the price, purity or availability of heroin at street level according to new research to be presented today at the second annual Corrections Health Conference at the Hilton Hotel.

The new study, by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, is the first study in Australia or overseas ever to examine the impact of heroin seizures on the heroin market.

The Bureau used undercover police to buy heroin at street level in Cabramatta, one of Australia's street heroin markets. The purchases were then sent to the Australian Government Analytical Laboratories for purity analysis.

Measures of heroin availability were obtained by interviewing heroin users seeking treatment at nearby methadone clinics.

During the study period 36 seizures of heroin of one kilogram or more were made by Australian law enforcement authorities. The largest single seizure was 123.5 kilograms but 13.9 per cent of seizures were in excess of 15 kilograms.

Despite the volume of large seizures, they exerted neither an immediate or delayed effect on the price, purity or availability of heroin in Cabramatta. The same result was found when the effect of heroin seizures within NSW was examined separately.

The Bureau study also looked at the effect of street-level enforcement on the rate of admission for methadone treatment.

It found that the variations in the rate of arrest for heroin use/possession exerted no immediate effect on the rate of admission for methadone treatment.

However when asked their reason(s) for seeking treatment 30 per cent of heroin users surveyed cited "trouble with police," 67 per cent stated that heroin was "too expensive" and 97 per cent stated that they were "tired of the lifestyle."

Commenting on the findings of the study, the Director of the Bureau, Dr Don Weatherburn, cautioned against the conclusion that investment in drug law enforcement was a waste of public money.

"Attempts to create a shortage of heroin may be doomed to failure," he said, "but the tough penalties faced by heroin importers and suppliers are almost certainly a factor in the high price of heroin at street-level."

"Keeping heroin expensive at street-level probably reduces the rate of entry into the heroin market by recreational heroin users. Since most regular (i.e. dependent) heroin users start out as recreational users, over the longer term it probably also reduces the number of dependent users."

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“High level drug law enforcement should therefore switch its focus from trying to maximize the quantities of heroin seized to trying to maximize the risks associated with heroin importation and distribution.”

“Put simply, it is probably better to prosecute 10 offenders each for supplying one kilogram of heroin than to prosecute one offender for supplying 10 kilograms of heroin.”

“At the same time, he said, we also need to review the way we deal with the existing population of between 36,000 and 45,000 regular heroin users across Australia.”

“If we do nothing more than keep the price of heroin high at street-level,” he said, “the benefits of reduced entry into the heroin market will be more than offset by the property crime committed by many of these people to fund their addiction.”

“So if the price is to be used as an “entrance barrier” to recreational heroin use we also need an “exit ramp” from the market for regular heroin users.”

According to Dr Weatherburn there are only two options for such an “exit ramp.” One is to expand and improve the public methadone program. The other is to prescribe heroin under controlled conditions to dependent users.

“At this stage we have no idea whether the prescription of heroin under controlled conditions to dependent users would have any benefits above and beyond those offered by expanding and improving the public methadone program,” he said.

“The ACT heroin trial offers a rare opportunity to examine this issue dispassionately and make an informed policy decision. If such a trial can be administered properly it deserves the support of both the Government and the Opposition”

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