

22nd February 2012: Consultation meeting – Australian National Council on Drugs

This morning I attended a very interesting and high level meeting on drugs in Australia. The Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD -www.ancd.org.au) directly advises the Prime Minister and all other Ministers and I had the opportunity to raise the issue of synthetic cannabis with them. The discussion around this issue will be reported in the meeting's communiqué to the Prime Minister and Cabinet.

The meeting was attended by about 70 people including members of the ANCD, Dept of Health reps, police, doctors and non-government organisations working with people affected by drugs and alcohol.

During the first half of the meeting, the ANCD reported on what they had been doing. There were also speakers from national organisations representing the people who work with people affected by drugs and alcohol and the Victorian health Department.

After the speakers, the floor was opened for questions, discussion and comments from ANCD members on issues raised. I was able to raise the issue of the continuing prohibition of synthetic cannabis products, the futility of this approach and whether they thought governments would ever be courageous enough to recognise the use of substances recreationally and introduce regulation. This ignited considerable debate in the room.

The WA police commissioner, Karl O'Callaghan, who is an ANCD member, commented that the existing approach was not working and that WA was looking to legislation being proposed in the UK where the onus of proof would be reversed and a supplier would need to prove that the product was not harmful or having a psychotropic effect. He acknowledged that this sort of legislation could almost be impossible to regulate and could, of course, unintentionally include alcohol and other currently legal substances. He went on to say that he felt that a new approach to drug use needed to be discussed.

Further lively discussion continued amongst attendees which was mostly positive. Pier de Carlo from the Vic Health then spoke asking the question why are we regulating some recreational drugs and making others illegal? Have we drawn the line in the right place? I was approached by a number of people who thanked me after the meeting for raising the issue.

Gino Vumbaca, the Executive Director of ANCD came and spoke to me after the meeting and was quite positive about the regulated conditions and structures of adult shops. He laughingly said, "well we should restrict tobacco to adult shops". We had quite a discussion about this and the ANCD's concerns about the easy availability of alcohol and cigarettes.

I am pleased that I attended and was able to speak up on a topic which incited so much debate. This debate will be recorded in the communiqué to the Prime Minister.

The Vic Health Department representative spoke about the progression of the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Strategy and the wide range of people on their expert advisory group. I will chase them up to see if there is any opportunity to provide a submission on our issues. I suspect the submission period has ended but there still might be an opportunity.

Robbie and I are of the opinion that this market can be eventually regulated and that in the meantime, it will be possible for the industry to work with police, politicians and the public to create an effective 'grey' market that will benefit traders as well as the public health. Meetings like this are important in getting these issues before legislators in a 'non-lobbying' mode.

Cheers

Fiona