

Uniting in NSW.ACT submission to the Victorian Parliament Legal and Social Issues Committee

Inquiry into the Drugs, Poisons and Controlled Substances Amendment (Pilot Medically Supervised Injecting Centre) Bill

Introduction

This submission is from Uniting in NSW.ACT (herein after referred to as 'Uniting'), the services and advocacy arm of The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of New South Wales and the ACT. We are the sister organisation of Uniting in Vic.Tas, which operates in Victoria and Tasmania.

In New South Wales and the ACT our specialist services are in the areas of aged care, disability, community services, chaplaincy and advocacy. We operate the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre (Uniting MSIC) in Sydney's Kings Cross, working closely with the NSW Department of Health. The centre has been operating for over 15 years and remains the only centre of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere. It is a success story the NSW Government is proud of.

We continue to share our operational knowledge and experience as we hope to replicate this successful model in other areas of Australia as well as internationally. The Uniting MSIC has saved countless lives.

We commend the Legal and Social Issues Committee for taking the time to closely consider a pilot of a similar type service in Victoria.

Background

There are three key areas under the Inquiry's TOR that Uniting is qualified to make comment on. The first two relate to recommendations in Coroner Hawkins' report (specifically the recommendation to establish a medically supervised injecting centre in Victoria, and the recommendation to increase the availability of Naloxone).

The third relates to a rethink in the way we approach drug use, moving away from criminalising people for personal use.

Establishment of a medically supervised injecting centre

Uniting holds the license for Australia's only medically supervised injecting centre. This service has been continuously operational since it opened in 2001, and it operates with bipartisan support from the NSW Government. It has been independently evaluated multiple times, and all evaluation reports have been positive. Additionally, there are now 238 peer reviewed scientific papers published in international medical literature that support the benefits of medically supervised injecting centres.

These have shown that such services:

- Save lives and reduce ambulance call-outs to drug overdose
- Reduce injuries associated with injecting drug use and drug overdose
- Improve uptake of detoxification, treatment and other health services
- Reduce blood borne virus transmission
- Improve local amenity by reducing public drug use
- Reduce inappropriately discarded injecting equipment.

Importantly, studies have also shown that supervised injecting services:

- Do not lead to an increase in crime
- Are cost effective and provide a positive return on investment.

Support for the Uniting MSIC is now widespread. Supporting organisations include:

- The Australian Medical Association
- The Royal Australasian College of Physicians
- The Royal Australian New Zealand College of Psychiatrists
- The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
- The National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre
- The National Drug Research Institute
- Hepatitis Australia
- The National Centre for Research and Training in Addiction
- The Kirby Institute
- The National Centre for Social Research in Health.

We support the call to establish a medically supervised injecting centre in areas of need, and specifically in Richmond. We note and support this key recommendation as stated by Coroner Hawkins.

These services have the biggest impact when established in areas of concentrated drug use and drug overdose. They of course save lives, they support ongoing support with vulnerable individuals, and put them in contact with essential health and social services. They are one part of a comprehensive response needed to address the complex issue of drug use. While by no means a 'silver bullet' they are necessary in order to ensure people are given the chance of rehabilitation by preventing unnecessary early death from overdose.

Medically supervised injecting centres are good examples of practical services that reduce harm to those who continue to inject drugs despite the best efforts of society.

Expanded availability of Naloxone

Uniting MSIC has always had approved protocols to allow the administration of Naloxone onsite by clinical trained registered nurses in the event of an opiate overdose.

In December 2014 we extended our service provision to provide Naloxone to our clients to take home, after they had received specific training. The effectiveness of this strategy was backed up by scientific evidence, and two other government funded services in the local district had developed training packages for clients.

The training ensured that clients could recognise and respond appropriately to an overdose, including calling an ambulance and administering Naloxone. Since then we have trained more

than 300 clients on how to respond to overdoses and administer Naloxone. Between them, these clients have been able to reverse at least 71 overdoses.

We also provide training to external organisations so their staff, who may be present at an overdose, also have those skills, and can administer Naloxone. This is done from within existing budget, in line with our legislative remit which is to reduce deaths from drug overdose.

Following the rescheduling of Naloxone by the Therapeutic Goods Administration in February 2016, we were granted an authority by the NSW Pharmaceutical Services Unit permitting registered nurses at Uniting MSIC to dispense Naloxone, without requiring the Medical Director to physically be available to hand over the medication. We are the only service to have such authority in NSW.

This is an important practical consideration, and reduces impediments to staff being able to ensure that all trained clients have physical access to freely provided Naloxone. Otherwise, despite the rescheduling which makes Naloxone potentially more available, or being over-the-counter, means it is far more expensive. For clients to get subsidised Naloxone they need a prescription and a doctor or pharmacist to physically dispense the medicine. This creates a significant impediment to widespread distribution of this life saving drug. Given the ever increasing number of accidental opiate overdoses in Australia, this is one way that Uniting MSIC can contribute to greater community availability of Naloxone.

Uniting supports the call for increased availability of Naloxone to first responders, and all people who are in a position to intervene. This includes peers, families and friends, and staff of services that interact with those at risk of overdose. We support either free or low cost availability of this product, it is safe and has no abuse potential.

A rethink in our approach to drug use

The Uniting Church in Australia, Synod of NSW and the ACT and Uniting are also currently calling on the NSW Government and ACT Government to change legislation to decriminalise the possession and use of small amounts of illegal drugs.

The issue of drug use and consumption can be confronting. Yet we are firmly of the view that practice should be grounded in seeking to improve a person's wellbeing, in values of compassion and understanding, and with the knowledge that a clear social gradient exists in relation to problematic drug use.

A rethink to our approach to individual drug use is essential. Governments should consider removing criminal sanctions as they relate to an individual's personal use of a drug.

We recommend that alternative sanctions, if necessary, could be considered instead of criminal records. This could include advice or referrals made by a health tribunal, as occurs in Portugal.

We believe that criminalising an individual, purely for their own personal use of any drug, should be ceased, and that drug use is better responded to as a health issue than a criminal one.

Final note:

Uniting believes that clear and courageous leadership is essential to achieving meaningful progress in drug policy in Australia. As a nation we must ensure that policies put people’s lives and wellbeing at their very core. Governments, both state and federal, play a key role in the health and wellbeing of individuals and their broader communities.

Uniting believes that Victoria has the opportunity to positively influence the broader debate on drug policy. We encourage the committee to embrace evidence-based recommendations and to recommend meaningful changes in order to save and improve people’s lives.

We thank for the Victorian Parliament’s Legal and Social Issues Committee for the opportunity to comment. We would be happy to appear before the Inquiry if requested.

Further information about the Uniting Medically Supervised Injecting Centre can be found on the Uniting website www.Uniting.org/MSIC.

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| <p>For further information please contact</p> | <p>Dr Marianne Jauncey Medical Director Medically Supervised Injecting Centre NSW.ACT Uniting in NSW.ACT [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]</p> <p>Alison Biar Media and Public Affairs Lead NSW.ACT Uniting in NSW.ACT [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]</p> |
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