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The Secretary of the Committee
Inquiry into the Support of Illicit Drug Use on Families
House of Representatives
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Inquiry into the Support of Illicit Drug Use on Families

My 23 year-old son is recovering from **heroin** addiction. Raised in a happy home with two parents, no violence, no sexual abuse, no dysfunction; he was private school educated, a good student, a cadet and a rugby second rower. A little over 18 months ago our family unit was thrown into total turmoil when we discovered that our only son was addicted to **heroin**. We now know that he had started using "socially" from age 18 but to us he was merely exhibiting behaviour associated with male adolescence. We were not drug educated at the time and it was hard to separate the two. Hindsight is a valuable asset, but at that time we just did not see it coming.

1. Financial, social and personal cost to families who have a member using illicit drugs, including impact of drug-induced psychosis or other mental disorders.

Financial

By the time we discovered our son was addicted to heroin, he had moved out of home and was at university struggling with a degree. He had a small casual job, but never seemed to have any money and was constantly asking us to pay for his university costs. We believed him when he said he did not earn much and so we paid for everything. We now realize his money was buying heroin.

Our son was completely broke and had drug debts everywhere as his habit spun out of control. He was behind in his rent and had hocked every valuable possession he had. Through the haze however, he somehow realized that his next step would be crime and asked for our help to gain control of his life. We love him unconditionally and knew he could never do it alone, so we paid his debts and brought him back home. We retrieved several of his items (laptop computer, medium format camera, sound system, guitar etc) from pawnshops. We paid for his continuing heroin use until we were able to organize an alternative, which was **methadone**. We also paid for this treatment.

He was committed to his methadone program and started progressing, so he decided to look for a permanent job. He needed new clothes, money for fares, phone credit, lunches etc. He had essentially become a dependant again at age 22. We paid all these expenses for some months until he slowly started taking responsibility.

We have spent **thousands of dollars** helping our son to take control of his life and even now, he still needs our help from time to time.

Social

When we discovered we were the parents of an illicit drug user, we found ourselves in an extraordinarily isolated position, suffering stigma and shame within the social network. We felt like we were falling apart and had absolutely no idea where to turn for help. We were sick with fear.

In desperation we contacted a counselor who kindly researched and located for us the phone number of an organization called **Family Drug Support**. I remember that first call I made and on the line was a person who listened, understood and helped. So began our journey of understanding, coping and helping our son to achieve some control in his life. I cannot speak too highly of this wonderful organization, which was founded in 1997 by Tony Trimmingham, a father who had most tragically lost his only son to a heroin overdose. Tony had become completely frustrated by the apathy, ignorance, and the total lack of support not only for himself, but also for other families in the same situation; as Tony so well puts it, we belong to the "club" that no parent wants to join or belong to.

Family Drug Support understood our pain completely. No one judged or condemned us, because they had "been there" or were still there. Over a period of months, we were able to educate ourselves, not only about drugs, but also how to go about being constructive support for our son.

Personal

We had received a phone call from our son one night and knew he was very low. He had been walking the streets for hours, he was upset, had no money and no friends. He wanted to come home. Seeing my beautiful tall, handsome, and intelligent son slumped in an inner west fast food outlet so alone and disorientated was the saddest night of my motherhood. I cannot describe to anyone my feelings; my absolute despair ... we were living every parent's nightmare.

Discovering our only child was addicted to heroin was a life changing experience for us. We are now there for our son, we are patient and tolerant, whilst encouraging him to be independent and responsible. My husband and I are thankful that our relationship has been strong enough to so far survive. We live one day at a time and try to enjoy life, but the worry and anxiety is always there. We believe we are fortunate, because we know that many families have been torn apart.

I did initially suffer several panic attacks, but with good medical advice they are now under control. My husband suffers from high blood pressure and takes medication. We have no major health issues at present but we do sometimes feel much older than we should. Stress is very tiring.

Mental

Our son now lives with the stigma that he has been an illicit drug user. He describes the last five years of his life as having existed in a fog. As he puts it, he "has a past". He now carries the scars of low self-esteem and emotional instability. He is academic, yes, but drug use during those tender years has also robbed him of social and budgeting skills.

2. The Impact of Harm Minimization on Families

I did not even know the meaning of the words "harm minimization" but I am now very aware that harm minimization has played a positive role in my son's rise from the despair of heroin addiction. I was very afraid as I practiced harm minimization in my own home for the first time, but the thought of dark, lonely, unhygienic public toilets, parks and doorways was too much for me to bear.

I would like to mention the Medically Supervised Injection Centre (MSIC) at Kings Cross, which provides a safe and clean environment for people who treat drug use as a permanent way of life, and is also a facility for others who are trying to get clean; also the various Needle & Syringe Program (NSP) locations. I am forever thankful that, to my knowledge, my son has never had to share a needle, because these facilities exist. It's only after you have been through an experience such as ours that you truly understand their importance. Clean needles, accessible treatment, understanding and compassion go hand in hand with dealing with the awful reality of drug use.

People in positions of power in this country who engage in diverse rhetoric about "getting tough" and having a "zero tolerance" attitude where drug use is concerned, and condemn the practice of "harm minimization", do not I feel understand its critical role.

3. Ways to Strengthen Families who are Coping with a Member using Illicit Drugs

Nobody benefits when there is a drug user in the family. We, the families are the real losers; but at the same time we are absolutely essential in the recovery process of an addict. We provide strength and support to our drug user and we usually have good knowledge, which can be used in tackling drug problems and discouraging drug use. I firmly believe that the majority of illicit drug users who do not have some sort of family support, are destined to failure. I doubt my son would ever have pulled himself together without our financial and emotional support. We families need to be supported by good public policy on drugs.

Some families simply have trouble facing the reality of illicit drug use within their family unit. Organizations like **Family Drug Support** help them to face this reality, and deal with it in a positive way for both the family members and the user.

Summary

Our son now has a university degree and a job. He is doing well. He is an intelligent and thoughtful member of the community, he has a social conscience and political views. We are proud of him. He has come a long way but still carries the scars of emotional dependency. With good family support and counseling, he is continually working towards becoming stronger.

I am now a member and a volunteer of **Family Drug Support**. I have gained knowledge and I want to help others. Volunteers who work on the **Family Drug Support 24-hour Help Line** deal first hand with families in crisis who are exposed daily to the reality of drug use. These families Australia-wide have been torn apart by shame and stigma, isolated within their own community whilst trying to live with the traumatic day-to-day consequences of drug use. Families who have lost everything; homes, cars, savings, superannuation, just trying to help their family member survive. We would all like the agony to stop but the reality is that the road to recovery is a long haul. I wish I could say that we are winning the war on drugs, but I fear we are not.

My message is that this can happen to anyone; it happened to us.

Thank you for reading my story. I passionately believe that **Family Drug Support** and other organizations, which support families of illicit drug users, should be given as much help as possible.