

INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF ILLICIT DRUG USE ON FAMILIES

10 March 2007

Hon. Ms. Bronwyn Bishop
Chairman
House Standing Committee on Family and Human Services

Dear Ms. Bishop

Please find below and attached my personal experience concerning illicit drugs and the subsequent impact on my family. I have written responses to some of my correspondence that I can mail to you if you wish. Included in these are letters from Mr. Phillip Ruddock, Mr. Peter Lindsay, Ms. Desley Boyle, Mr. Frank Duggan and others.

This is a personal submission to the inquiry. I have attached several documents which I hope will be helpful to you and the committee in this inquiry.

FINANCIAL, SOCIAL AND PERSONAL COSTS TO FAMILIES

My eldest daughter started taking drugs when she was 16yrs old. Two boys at the school she attended introduced her to amphetamines and marijuana. At first she took these drugs to lose weight but then the addiction became so severe that she needed more and more. She began associating with drug dealers and criminals. At 18yrs she was totally hooked. As you will read in the attached documents this spiraled into a situation where she now is completely dysfunctional and unable to care for her children. She lives with her male partner (not the father of any of the children) who is also a drug addict, has suffered cerebral aneurysms due to drug use and they are involved in illicit drugs, the Raelian Sect, witchcraft, prostitution and pornography.

The father of the two eldest children was also a drug addict and he is a paraplegic now being cared for by ACT Disability Services.

The father of the youngest child was a heroin addict and his current where a bouts is unknown.

My daughter's eldest child is 18yrs old, addicted to drugs and has a criminal record which began when he was 13 yrs old. He has spent time in Quamby, a juvenile detention centre in Canberra. I am not aware of his current where a bouts.

Her other two children aged 14yrs and 7yrs live with me on a permanent basis. Her daughter, now 14yrs old, has refused to speak to or see her since she was 10. She suffers Post Traumatic Stress but this is improving with counselling and the safe and secure environment in which she now lives.

Her son, now 7yrs. is attending learning support classes at school. It has taken 4 years to modify his behaviour to the point where he can function normally. As you will read from the attached material he had a very bad start to life. In 2003 the Federal Magistrates Court made an access order for his mother three times a year during school holidays. It soon became apparent that she was still using illicit drugs; she was still abusing and neglecting him when he was with her. Last year (July 2006) I took the necessary steps to ensure his wellbeing and safety.

The financial, social, emotional, physical and spiritual cost to myself and other family members is immeasurable. I could list the cost for schooling, sports, singing lessons, clothing, food, outings, holidays, toys, games, furniture, iPods and the like, computers, etc etc but I am sure that you will be aware of the cost of raising a family. My problem is that I have already done this once and am now having to do it all over again just when I thought about retiring and growing old gracefully. This time however I am having to deal with the children's emotional and social problems as well as the normal hassles of life with children.

My other daughter, the children's aunty should be nominated for an award of some sort. She has willingly taken on the role of sharing the raising of her niece and nephew. Without her my job would be so much more difficult. She is always there when needed.

I have attached several documents, correspondence and notes that I hope will assist you and the Committee in assessing some of the financial, social and personal cost to our family. The impact goes far

beyond the drug user. My daughter has destroyed herself, physically, emotionally, psychologically and spiritually. She weighs 36Kg. and is in very poor health. She has lost all three of her children. She has totally alienated herself from the entire family and is completely under the control of her male partner.

The children have suffered abuse and neglect causing damage to their physical, emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. They have suffered grief which can never really be resolved. Their mother is alive but they have lost her.

The cost to me as the children's grandmother has been high. I have had to retire from my involvement in International Judging with Women's Artistic Gymnastics. I can no longer travel in Australia or overseas whenever I wish. I do not have time to socialize as I was expecting to be able to do when I semi-retired. I do not have the time to do the things I want to do as I have to spend time transporting children to school, sporting activities, homework, school functions etc etc etc. All my spare money now goes on the children. I get no financial assistance other than the Family Tax benefit. I am not entitled to Foster Carers' Payments because in Queensland, where we live, grandparents are not eligible.

The list goes on and on.

HARM MINIMISATION

I was a member of the ACT Combined Parents and Citizens Association in the 1980's when Marijuana was legalized in the ACT. We opposed this. It would seem that this Harm Minimization program didn't really work very well as evidenced by the need for your committee to be conducting an inquiry.

Needle exchange programs don't seem to be working all that well either. They may have inhibited the spread of AIDS and other diseases but the people using the needles to inject the mind altering drugs are still breeding a generation of children who are being abused and neglected. They may not have AIDS but they are still brain damaged and dysfunctional. The same can be said of Safe Injecting Rooms.

WAYS TO STRENGTHEN FAMILIES

I can only tell you what would have helped me in my situation:

1. Our family doctor would not discuss my daughter's drug problem with me because he said it breached confidentiality. The laws relating to this issue need to be reviewed. Together we may have saved her. Mandatory medical treatment is the only way to break the cycle.
2. The deterrents and punishment for drug dealing and associated criminal activities should be increased and implemented. The soft option does not appear to be working. So often you read in the media that a lesser penalty has been handed down because the person was selling drugs to support their own habit. My daughter sold drugs to high school students in Canberra to support her habit. How many lives this impacted on nobody knows. She continued to do this when she was serving community service.
3. Family members need to be listened to and believed when they approach Child Protection agencies and departments. Very often the issues regarding children are a direct result of illicit drug use by the parents. My daughter fed her own children drugs and caused untold damage which will impact on their lives forever. The Departments in ACT and Queensland would not listen.
4. There needs to be more liaison between government departments, social welfare organizations, medical profession, schools and families.

Imagine you are three years old.

You wake in the morning and your mother is in bed asleep. You cannot wake her. You are very hungry. There is no food in the cupboard or the fridge. Your brother and sister have gone to school. You eat dry dog food from the bowl on the floor. You get out all your toy cars. These are the only toys you have so you sit in your room for the next 4 – 5 hours playing obsessively with the cars. Occasionally you go to the lounge room to play the X – box. The lounge room is painted dark purple and black and the X – box is connected to the big screen in the corner. You sit in the car seat set up in the middle of the lounge room. The big black and white squares painted on one wall make you dizzy when you look at them.

You get hungry again so you eat some more dog food. Your nappy is full and you take it off. You hear your mother getting out of bed. You know that you are in trouble because you have dropped poo on the carpet and you wait for the yelling and the belting which makes you cry for a while but then your mother comforts you by playing with your penis. This feels good and you know that your mother loves you.

Your mother takes you into the shower with her. She scrubs you with a nailbrush all over to get you clean. You scream but the scrubbing continues. After the shower your mother again strokes you all over and plays with your penis. This feels good.

Your mother takes you into her bed with her boyfriend and you all sleep until your brother and sister come home. Your brother gets a belting from the boyfriend for coming home late. He gets one hit for each minute he is late. Your sister goes to her friend's house. You won't see her again until bedtime.

Your mother and her boyfriend are in the kitchen. You are not allowed in there. They are smoking dope. You do not like the smell. You play in your room with the cars. Your mother brings you some burnt food for dinner. It tastes awful but you are very hungry so you eat it. Later you will get some more dog food when your mother is asleep again. The dog food tastes good.

Your sister comes home from her friend's house. She gets hit across the face and yelled at for not being home earlier. She goes to bed crying. You play the X – Box. You are wearing the same clothes you have had on for the last three days. You smell. Your nappy is wet. You have a rash that hurts a lot. You fall asleep in the car seat.

Late at night you wake up. There is a lot of yelling and screaming going on. Your mother is drunk again and her boyfriend is beating up on her. There are a lot of people in the kitchen smoking dope and using needles. You go to the kitchen and your mother grabs you and throws you onto your bed and tells you to stay there or else. After a while you drop off to sleep.

The next day it all starts over again just as the day before and the day before that. This has been your life since the day you were born.

Imagine you are eight years old.

You spend most of your time at your friend's house. You go there whenever you can because being at home is just too painful. Your mother is a drug addict and in your short lifetime she has lived with three abusive, drug addicted, violent men. The latest one is very scary. He yells and screams all the time and blames you and your brother for everything that goes wrong.

He beats your brother and he makes you do things that are scary. He watches pornographic videos and makes you watch them with him. Your mother says he is a good man and knows more about disciplining children than anyone. He makes your brother live in the caravan in the backyard with his drug addict mates.

You have a brother who is 1 yr old. You have to look after him all the time because your mother stays in bed most of the day. If he wakes up your mother she yells at you and belts you.

Your mother and her boyfriend takes you to a brothel and introduce you to the ladies there. You are told one day you can work there and make lots of money.

Your brother is always angry and he bashes you up. He makes you touch his penis and give him an erection. He is 12 yrs old. You are too afraid to tell anyone because he tells you that you asked for it. You don't know what is right and wrong. You are very confused and afraid.

You get into trouble at school because you talk about sex to the other girls. Their mothers complain to the principal and you get into trouble. You don't realise what you are doing is wrong. Your mother keeps telling you there is nothing wrong with sex.

Sometimes you lock yourself in your bedroom and put towels at the bottom of the door so you can't hear the noise in the house. This is when your mother and her friends are having drug parties. There are a lot of scary people in the house.

Your mother has used drugs for as long as you can remember. You know nothing else. You were born on the front seat of the car because your mother was so high on drugs she didn't know she was in labour. Your father was a drug addict. Your mother has told you he is dead but he isn't really. He is paralyzed from suffering a cerebral haemorrhage due to drug use.

Your 12 yr old brother is spending more time out on the streets with his 'gang' and you are thinking that this might be better than living at home. You can't tell your Nana because your mother has threatened you. She keeps telling you that Nana is a bitch. You don't understand why. Nana has never hurt you.

You will make a decision when you are 10yrs old that you never want to see or talk to your mother again. You maintain this resolve even now at 14yrs old.

Imagine you are 12 yrs old.

You have grown up and lived with violence since you were born. Your mother delivers drug to people in the neighbourhood and to schools transporting them in your stroller. She used selling Avon as a cover. Your father teaches you to drink beer when you are 4yrs old. Your mother lets you smoke her marijuana when you are 8yrs. old. She tells you your real father is dead. This isn't true.

You watch your mother through three drug addict, abusive and violent partners. You see her bashed and abused time and again. You watch pornographic videos and see pictures of your mother and her partner naked on the walls of the house. You are forced to live in a caravan in the backyard with drug addict men, friends of your mother and her partner. They abuse you but you can't tell anyone.

Your mother's partner locks you in the caravan to 'write lines' as punishment. He beats you every time you do something wrong in his eyes. Your mother tells her partner to beat you because you are getting to big for her to handle and he knows the best way to do it without leaving bruises.

You sexually abuse your sister and baby brother. You are very confused, angry and scared all time. You don't know what to do because you don't know any different. You can't tell your Nana because your mother has convinced you that she is a bitch, a liar and doesn't care.

By the time you are 18yrs you will have been expelled from three schools and have been in and out of a Juvenile Detention Centre several times. You will be addicted to drugs, petrol sniffing and alcohol. You will have a criminal record. At 18yrs old you will be treated in the Courts as an adult. No one has ever taught you how to be one.

Imagine you are a grandmother.

You beg for help from the day in 1987 when you suspect your daughter is on drugs. You are told by your family doctor that he cannot discuss this with you due to patient confidentiality. You watch your daughter spiral into a lifestyle of drugs, prostitution, pornography, witchcraft and the Raelian Sect. You see her year after year changing partners all of whom are drug addicts, violent and abusive. You try to be present as a support for your grandchildren over the ensuing years. You report your concerns re the welfare of the children to doctors, welfare agencies, school teachers but to no avail. People just seem to not want to know about it. It appears that it just isn't 'bad enough' for anyone to take it too seriously. Or is it so bad that people cannot cope with it?

Your sister phones you and says there is a problem with the children. They are now 14yrs, 10yrs and 3yrs old. You say there is nothing you can do. They are not your children and their mother needs to look after them properly. Your sister insists that things are very serious. You agree to your daughter and the three children coming to live with you. You do this with reservation as you have already done it twice before and been badly hurt. You try to get your daughter to seek help for her drug addiction. She continues to deny there is a problem. Every time you bring up the subject she verbally abuses you. Your daughter lives with you for 6 months and then returns to the boyfriend interstate leaving the children with you.

You observe some very disturbing behaviour in all three children. You can't quite put your finger on it but instinctively you know there is something terribly wrong. You decide it is time to take a stand and you seek advice from the Dept. Child Safety. No action. You go to a politician for advice. You contact the Juvenile Aid Bureau. The older child returns to his mother and ultimately ends up in a Juvenile Detention Centre.

They tell you it is not bad enough for them to take action. Some people even tell you "*sometimes people make these things up*". The politician tells you to seek legal advice. You do this and the result is that you end up with permanent custody of the two younger children. The judge however grants the mother unsupervised access. For two years the abuse of the youngest child continues and you finally, after failed attempts to vary the court order, stop all access by the mother. You have broken the law and may or may not have to deal with this in the future.

You are now 61yrs old and have the responsibility of rearing two children aged 14yrs and 7yrs. You have very little money and you are not eligible for any foster care allowances. Your savings are dwindling and the cost of raising the children is placing you in financial hardship.

Imagine you are the sister of a drug addict.

You are two years younger than your sister and all your childhood life you have looked up to her and admired her. At 16 yrs old you watch you sister spiral into a very scary lifestyle of drugs, prostitution, witchcraft, the Raelian Sect and several violent, abusive, drug addict partners. You see your sister 'shooting up'. You see her dancing naked on a table at a nightclub. You decide you want nothing to do with this lifestyle and you get on with your life.

At age 33yrs you own your own gymnastics club and you have purchased a house. Your mother joins you in the business and together you build up a successful club in Queensland. Then the bubble bursts. Your sister is no longer able to care for her three children and they come to live with you and your Mum. Your whole life changes in an instant. Suddenly you have children to care for. Washing, cleaning, cooking, feeding, clothing, taking to school and sports. The list goes on and on. You feel total resentment and disgust at your sister's behaviour. You often think, "How dare she treat her children so badly." You become increasingly aware of the damage that children suffer when they are exposed to drugs, violence and abuse over long periods of time. You wonder why the authorities never did anything.

You watch your niece having sever panic attacks and you don't know what to do. You spend a lot of time with your nephew helping him with his homework. He is having learning support at school because of delayed development due to the abuse he suffered for the first three years of his life.

Sometimes, especially when you are watching you nephew play soccer, you wonder what your sister is doing now. You stop yourself from thinking, as it is too painful.

You have come to terms with the fact that for the next 10 years you have the responsibility of helping your Mum raise your sister's children.