

Committee Secretary
Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear sir / madam

I am writing to you in regard to the “ice epidemic” that is afflicting the country. I welcome the Task Force that the Prime Minister has announced and hope that it is able to come up with some solutions to minimise the impact this drug is having on society.

My interest in this topic is very personal. Just before Christmas last year, my eldest son (aged just 26) was killed on his way home from work in the city by a driver whose ice reading was so high the medical coroner said she should not be alive. (The case is still before the courts). Around 8 years ago, my niece and a friend of hers were stabbed by her then boyfriend who was high on ice.

My comments will primarily address the Committee’s terms of reference paragraphs (e) and (f).

From what I know about the drug, it seems to have a near-immediate and massive affect on users’ judgements. It can make them very aggressive, prone to risk-taking and dramatically alter their normal personality. The impact (on users and society) is far more severe than virtually all other drugs, including alcohol and even heroin. For this reason, I find it hard to understand the logic of arguments in favour of legalising or even trying to regulate it.

Further to this point, I believe society should not “normalise” the use of ice (and indeed most other hard drugs). The Cambridge Dictionary defines “evil” as “morally bad, cruel or very unpleasant”. The impact of ice on our community is certainly evil. Just as our attitudes to things like child abuse and racism (among many others) have altered radically over the past generation, so too should our attitudes to these drugs which have so many negative consequences.

Yes, alcohol is a massive problem for our society. However, the experts seem to agree that it largely due to over-consumption and can be taken in small doses with relatively small negative effects. The same can’t be said for hard drugs such as ice. Ice is also highly addictive. Comparisons to soft drugs like alcohol typically miss the point – although numerous “demand management” issues have much in common.

Solving this complex problem obviously involves trying to control the supply coming onto the streets as well as reducing the demand. My earlier point about changing society’s attitude to hard drugs such as ice must play an important part re the latter. Just as now we often think twice about smacking a naughty child or even telling a joke which stereotypes certain people, so too should people think twice about taking drugs – particularly for the first time.

I may be naive but I think people should be responsible for their decisions and actions. We are not all lemmings. In nearly all cases, people have choices. They can say no, even under pressure. The attitude that “someone else made me do it” is just a cop out. Lots of people from humble or difficult beginnings have made positive life-altering choices. Ultimately it is our personal decision as to whether we take drugs or not and as such we should accept the consequences.

People take drugs for all sorts of reasons – getting a quick “high” and/or adrenalin rush, peer group pressure, experimentation, rebelling against the rules and so on. One of the problems with ice and heroin is that they are highly addictive, so having gone down that path, it is very hard to turn back. The drug itself can also “muck” with their heads and judgements. Hence, it is very important that –

- People are educated about drugs and what they might be embarking upon
- They have a clear mind when making the choice – alcohol and peer pressure may influence the weaker-willed
- We reduce the temptation through cutting back the supply (and pushing up the price)

It is also important that people are able to get a second chance. We don’t always behave rationally and have all made mistakes in our lives. Anyone wishing to quit should be encouraged to do so and appropriate resources made available. I’m sure any cost-benefit analysis of the costs to society of the ice epidemic relative to the costs of education, treatment programs and law enforcement would come out in favour of the latter.

That said, persistent ice users must be dealt harshly by society, particularly the legal system. Just as our tolerance to drink driving and alcohol-related violence has lessened dramatically in recent times, so too must attitudes toughen up in relation to hard drugs like ice. Society needs to protect the innocent victims of some people getting themselves into a state whereby they lose control.

Personally, I am tired of drug-affected people being portrayed as the “victim”. Yes, they may have some deep-seated issues they have had to deal with - but haven’t we all. They have made their own choices. In the case of the young woman who ran into my son and killed him, she –

- Chose to associate with persons she knew to be drug addicts
- Chose to start taking ice (presumably seeing first hand the potential dangers of the drug)
- Chose to take ice on the day of (and maybe days before) my son’s accident
- Chose to drive a car on public roads when high on the drug. While her judgement about whether she should drive must have been impaired, why would you hire a car – presumably with the intention of driving it – in the first place?
- In choosing to drive, according to numerous witnesses, she drove erratically in the lead-up to the accident
- Chose to turn right from the middle lane, not the purpose-built turning lane

If any one of these choices was reversed, my son would still be alive. It was all due to her choices.

I was told by the officer in charge of the accident investigation that the driver’s young boyfriend, who was a passenger in the car at the time, had over 200 prior drug-related charges and both were well known to local police for their drug activities. Without wishing to labour the point about my son’s accident, descriptions of the passenger suggest some one stereotypical of a hard drug user.

Unfortunately, most stereotypes develop for a good reason. ¹ However, they can provide some valuable short cuts to police trying to investigate and arrest users, their suppliers and so on. Police resources need to be concentrated on the most likely targets and/or those with the greatest

¹ Yes, I understand that there are many exceptions and more than a cursory analysis is required.

negative impact on society.² It's the old 80/20 rule. If necessary, a review of police procedures may need to be undertaken to reduce "unnecessary" paperwork, alter priorities and so on.

Society also needs to query why serial and/or dangerous offenders are allowed back onto the streets, apparently unimpeded. If rehabilitation is a viable option, by all means provide the necessary help. However, shouldn't heavy users and traffickers get some gaol time? For those deemed suitable to continue to be part of regular society, I believe serial and/or potentially dangerous offenders must have restrictions on whom they can and can't associate with.³ Moreover, they should be subjected to having regular blood testing, hopefully just a pin-prick if the technology allows.⁴ Some form of real-time monitoring device should also be used to track their movements. This would highlight whether or not they were going to some banned place. It might also help police ascertain whether a group of such persons were all together (and perhaps using drugs).

There is also the case of what I would call "private users" – those using a drug behind closed doors, apparently not hurting anyone else. It is in theory a victimless crime. It may be a valid argument in relation to soft drugs like alcohol and marijuana, where the user has some control over the volumes they consume, how high they get and what they do / where they go. However, for drugs such as ice, I understand that this rational control soon disappears. One cannot reasonably predict where they will go and how they will behave. Many doctors and nurses have been hurt trying to assist users who become aggressive and irrational once discovered and judged as being at serious risk. Never mind if they injure other people. As such, it is hard to argue that ice use doesn't hurt anyone.

Is this all an over-reaction or an infringement of their civil liberties? Ordinarily, I would classify myself as a civil libertarian. However, when the proven negative impacts of hard drugs like ice are so high, it is so addictive and users lose their capacity for rational thought, I believe society needs to take a tough line. Some form of prevention is better than a non-existent cure.

I am more than happy to meet with you to discuss my sentiments and thoughts should you so wish. I would also be happy for you to pass on this letter to other relevant Ministers.

Yours sincerely

² These may sometimes be at odds.

³ Perhaps beefed-up bail conditions.

⁴ The regularity of such tests would depend upon how quickly the body metabolises the drugs.