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In good hands...
In good health



Moreland Community Health Service Inc.

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Values: • Passion • Responsibility • Integrity • Diversity • Engagement

16.3.07

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Submission to: Inquiry into the impact of illicit drug use on families

For the professionals who work in areas that support those with drug or alcohol problems, it comes as no surprise that the impact of the addiction spreads wider than just the individual user. A response that focuses solely on the person using drugs is very limited and limiting.

Approximately 15 years ago **raft** was established to provide counselling to families dealing with dependencies. However securing ongoing funding presented many dilemmas. To prevent the service from closing it merged with Moreland Community Health Service in 1999. In 2002 it was able to attract ongoing funding from the Victorian Department of Human Services.

Since its inception **raft** has been providing counselling to families who are dealing with the effects of drug or alcohol use. Families may attend with or without the drug using family member. Our definition of a family member includes parents, partners, children and at times the extended family.

This service was established specifically for families as an acknowledgement of the impact that substance use had on the functioning of individual family members, the family unit and family relationships; and also as an acknowledgement that families had their own specific needs as they struggled to maintain their family life while trying to support the drug dependent family member.

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- Glenroy Centre:** 5D Cromwell Street, Glenroy 3046 Phone 9304 9200 Fax 9300 3283
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- Station Street:** 2A Station Street, Coburg 3058 Phone 9384 2222 Fax 9384 2245
- Vic.Place:** 21 Victoria Street, Coburg 3058 Phone 9355 9900 Fax 9355 9993
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From **raft's** experience, we can safely report that families experience a myriad of effects which can impact on them emotionally, psychologically, financially, socially and physically. Drug use can lead to the breakdown of family: relationships, cohesion, functioning and purpose. Ultimately it can result in family breakdown characterized by estrangement and rejection.

The hurdles a family experiences in order to maintain relationships, the family unit and support the drug dependent person can feel overwhelming. Families with drug or alcohol dependent family members often feel isolated, anxious and stressed; depression is a common factor amongst family members.

Conflict and feelings of anger are not uncommon and at times they lead to violence. This conflict may be due to different views of the dependency and how to manage it; the stress placed on the family by the demands that drug dependency creates; fear of impending death, financial demands/threats, fear of the drug user. Violence can be used intentionally against family members for different purposes e.g. to persuade family members to meet demands, e.g. money.

Substance use can lead to involvement in criminal behaviour, contact with the justice system and involvement with criminal elements. For some families this creates fear, shame, anger and powerlessness. Families at times are silenced by fear of involving police or as a result of threats being made against their drug dependent family member or themselves. Although this may appear extreme it is not so uncommon. In some cultures involving or calling police is too shaming. For other families guilt prevents them from calling the police or setting boundaries for fear of what may happen to the drug user or being blamed by the drug user for involving police.

Shame may also lead to families isolating themselves from their support structure as they struggle to keep the secret of what is happening within their families. Most parents don't wish for others to think badly of the drug user or of themselves as parents. Family members often wonder whether they could have done something differently or whether they should do more.

Parents, partners and children can all feel that they are failing in their role and relationship with the drug user and may blame themselves for what is occurring.

The resulting long term effects of substance use e.g. development of an ongoing mental illness or acquired brain injury leaves families dealing with a long term and chronic disability. This places more demands on families emotional, financial and practical resources as at times families become the carers of a person with a permanent disability.

Although harm minimization minimizes mortality and morbidity rates among drug users, it is often a difficult concept for families to negotiate because families just want the chaos created and the drug use to stop. Their fear of losing the drug using person also focuses them on wanting the drug use to cease.

Loss and grief is also another issue families need to negotiate, this can be the result of a death or the result of those things that are not so tangible, e.g. loss of dreams they had for their child, loss of hopes and dreams of a relationship, for children the loss of a healthy attachment or loss of their childhood.

The intense emotions and ongoing pressure experienced by family members can lead to parent's own couple relationship breaking down, siblings becoming estranged from each other, children rejecting their parents.

When one takes into account all that a family is required to negotiate you can appreciate why they may feel overwhelmed and powerless and you can begin to understand that the impact of the drug use does not stop with the drug user. It is therefore not surprising that many are left traumatized and struggling with their own emotional, psychological and physiological health.

Families are important and central to recovery. They are an important resource in overcoming a drug dependency. Families and family relationships need to be enhanced and strengthened to sustain a family but also to enable change.

Much of the current focus and direction of Drug and Alcohol resources has been focused on the drug and drug user. There is a strong assumption that if these are fixed, all will be well. However from our experience even though the drug user may 'recover' from the dependency, it is not wise or safe to assume that the family or family relationships will also 'recover'.

We strongly recommend that more drug and alcohol resources need to be invested in supporting families and family relationships.

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