

Resolution of Council

11 April 2022

Item 3.1

21st Anniversary of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

On 6 May 2022, the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross will celebrate 21 years of saving lives, helping injecting drug users address problematic drug use and taking injecting off the streets.

This is a remarkable achievement, particularly as the Centre initially opened on a trial basis for 18 months. It is also remarkable given the challenges it faced in opening and the opposition to it opening at all.

I first recognised the need for such a Centre as Member for Bligh. Young people were dying from drug overdoses and the community was increasingly confronted by people injecting on the street. It was a rare week when my office was not contacted by someone concerned about the impacts of drug use in Kings Cross.

Impetus for establishing a centre came in 1997 when Justice James Wood presented his final report on his Royal Commission into the NSW Police. After examining issues of illegal drugs and police corruption, Commissioner Wood recommended that the establishment of safe, sanitary injecting rooms should be approved. He said:

“At present, publicly funded programs operate to provide syringes and needles to injecting drug users with the clear understanding they will be used to administer prohibited drugs. In these circumstances, to shrink from the provision of safe, sanitary premises where users can safely inject is somewhat short-sighted. The health and public safety benefits outweigh the policy considerations against condoning otherwise unlawful behaviour.”

Parliament responded to Justice Wood's recommendation by establishing a Joint Select Committee to examine his recommendation. I was a member of that Committee.

The Committee visited Cabramatta and met with drug users; we inspected Porky's in Kings Cross, which at the time was a de facto injecting centre, and with local residents I went to Caroline Lane in Redfern, which then had a reputation for street drug use. We took compelling evidence from families, and we were presented with information on action in other countries that was more effectively addressing this serious health problem.

However, when the Committee reported in February 1998 it recommended that the establishment or trial of injecting rooms not proceed. Not all Committee members agreed with this recommendation. Four members, Ian Cohen of the Greens, Labor MPs Ann Symonds and John Mills and I provided dissenting report. We agreed with Commissioner Wood and recommended a scientifically rigorous trial of safe injecting rooms as part of an integrated public health and safety approach to injecting drug use. The Committee's majority report was not the end of the matter.

Shortly before the NSW election in March 1999, the Sun-Herald published a front page story about drug use, accompanied by a photo of a young user shooting up in Caroline Lane. And on the eve of Sydney hosting the Olympics, the then Premier Bob Carr responded to this disturbing publicity by committing to holding a Drug Summit if he was re-elected.

The Drug Summit was duly held in April 1999. We took evidence from experts and we heard about the experiences of families across NSW. MPs learnt that drug addiction does not discriminate – it has consequences for users and for their families, in the suburbs, in the country. Towards the end of the Summit, as Member for Bligh which included Kings Cross, I moved the motion recommending an injecting centre trial which received majority support in Parliament.

In November 1999, the Government responded to the Summit's recommendations with the Drug Summit Legislative Response Bill, which included provisions for the trial of one medically supervised injecting centre in Kings Cross for 18 months. The Centre was to be established and operated by a non-Government agency. The then Labor Member for Cabramatta refused to have such a centre in her electorate. Initially the Sisters of Charity from St Vincent's Hospital offered to run the centre, but the then Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, George Pell, purportedly on behalf of the Pope, opposed them being involved. At the time I suggested there was more concern about the corporate image of the Church than the work of Christ.

The Reverend Harry Herbert and Uniting Care then stepped up to establish and operate the Centre. A community consultation committee was established and the search for suitable premises began. We inspected 19 premises before in early 2000 a former pinball parlour at 66 Darlinghurst Road was confirmed as the Centre's home, enabling Uniting Care to formally apply for the licence to operate the Centre.

Two years after it opened, the first independent evaluation of the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre found that it had achieved positive results in terms of getting users into treatment and no deaths.

Gutless NSW Parliaments extended the Centre's trial three times until 2010, that's almost 10 years, when it finally passed legislation ending the trial and allowing the Centre to operate on a permanent ongoing basis.

A third independent evaluation found that the centre had saved lives with no deaths and avoided serious injury with 3,426 drug overdoses by its clients being successfully managed. The Centre had also been successful in referring its clients to drug dependence treatment with 3,871 referrals accepted by clients since 2001.

The impact of the Centre is not shown by statistics alone. Marking the Centre's 10th Anniversary in 2011, I said: "Residents and business operators in Kings Cross no longer see people slumped in doorways, streets and parks and used needles piled up in public places. Ambulances no longer get the huge number of callouts, and local emergency departments see much fewer drug overdoses these days."

Apart from providing a safe place for injecting drug users the centre undertakes a range of initiatives, including needle and syringe programs, community sharps disposal bins, primary health care services and research. It has positioned Sydney as an international leader in harm reduction and in minimising the transmission of HIV and hepatitis C. It is also an important signifier of the kind of city we want Sydney to be: one that is compassionate and responsive to the needs of all its people – including those who struggle with drug addiction.

For these reasons, I am recommending to Council that the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre be granted the keys of the City of Sydney.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor), seconded by Councillor Scully –

It is resolved that Council:

- (A) grant the Keys of the City of Sydney to the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross to commemorate its 21 years of service to the Sydney community in saving lives, helping injecting drug users address problematic drug use and taking injecting off the streets;
- (B) commend present and past Centre staff for their commitment and compassion under the leadership of current director Dr Marianne Jauncey and foundation director Dr Ingrid van Beek; and
- (C) commend the many people whose courage and foresight ensured that the Centre became a reality and continued to operate, often in the face of government doubts and ever hostile opposition.

Carried unanimously.

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