

Resolution of Council

11 February 2019

Item 3.3

The Need for Practical and Compassionate Action on Drugs

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

The effectiveness of simplistic “don’t take drugs” messages has long been questioned – indeed such messages often have the opposite impact when they are delivered by those who lack credibility with their intended recipients, particularly with young people.

Media reports suggest that 25 people attending music festivals over the Australia Day weekend were taken to hospital, mostly after suspected illicit drug use. The reporting also suggests that police pulled aside numerous other people for suspected drug offences.

In the past five months, five people have died after taking illicit drugs at music festivals. Their ages ranged from 19 to 23.

It’s clear that a new approach is urgently needed, which is why I support calls for a new drug summit where all options, including practical and compassionate proposals for drug testing, are considered.

As Member for Bligh, I took part in the first Drug Summit following the 1999 election. That summit, held over five days at Parliament House, brought together Members of Parliament, experts in the medical and social aspects of drug use, community representatives, families, and people with experience of drug use and its effects.

During the course of that week I saw the views of MPs and others change as they heard compelling evidence and engaged in serious discussion about issues that were confronting for many of them.

While a trial of a medically-supervised injecting room was the Summit's most high-profile outcome, it achieved much more. The Summit made 172 recommendations relating to young people and drugs, treatment services, drug education, law enforcement, breaking the drugs and crime cycle and community action.

The catalyst for that Summit was a photograph published on the front page of a major newspaper of a boy injecting himself in a Redfern laneway. That photograph brought home the harm our young people were facing from illicit drug use and the limitations of the existing action. The recent deaths and medical emergencies at music festivals similarly forces us to confront both the harm from illicit drug use and our current approaches.

A new drug summit is urgent. It must bring together Members of Parliament, relevant government agencies and experts, community representatives and people affected by drug use.

The Summit should be open to examining all possible ideas which could contribute to minimising the harm from illicit drug use. It must consider whether existing approaches are working effectively or whether they are perversely increasing the risk of harm. Given the current public debate, it must consider illicit drug testing calmly and rationally, by examining the findings and evidence from existing programs, hearing from the experts and addressing the issues around proceeding with an effective drug testing trial in NSW.

The 1999 Drug Summit took this approach when developing the recommendation to trial medically supervised injecting rooms. That Summit's final recommendation not only supported the trial in principle, but envisaged it would be conducted by a non-government organisation, set up in areas where there was a high prevalence of street dealing in illicit drugs, and incorporated options for primary health care, counselling and referral for treatment.

A minority at the Drug Summit vehemently opposed this proposal, arguing that it would send the wrong message about drugs and encourage illicit drug use. The same claims are now being made not only about drug testing, but about the idea of even holding a drug summit.

The first and only medically supervised injecting centre in NSW opened in my electorate of Bligh in Kings Cross in 2001. Over the past 18 years it has supervised more than one million injections, managed over 7,400 overdoses without a single fatality, made around 13,000 referrals to external health and social welfare services and dramatically reduced the number of ambulance callouts to Kings Cross and the number of needles discarded in public places. Its opponents' fears have not been realised. Instead, the Centre has been instrumental in saving many lives.

The decision to establish it only occurred after serious informed discussion and detailed consideration of all the issues involved. The refusal by some to agree to a similar informed discussion and detailed consideration of new approaches may result in more deaths.

Some opposition to illicit drug testing appears to be based on the mistaken belief that the testing is designed to determine whether drugs are "safe". This was not the aim of the trial conducted at the Groovin the Moo festival in Canberra in April 2018.

At this festival, 125 people submitted drug samples together with information about what they believed the drugs contained. Patrons were informed whether the test had found that the sample was the same as they expected, whether it differed significantly from what was expected, or whether it contained a harmful substance or produced an ambivalent result. After receiving the test results, 18 per cent said they would not use illicit drugs, 12 per cent said they would use less and seven per cent were unsure. Sixty-six per cent of trial participants said they knew of others using the same drugs and 90 per cent said they would share the results. This potentially further reduced the number of people taking harmful substances.

At the same festival, first-aid workers treated 86 people mainly for drug or alcohol related issues. None of these 86 people had submitted drugs for testing.

Others may be opposed because they have no understanding of how drug testing would operate, or what it is attempting to achieve.

A group of medical professionals have approached me requesting the use of a City owned building to demonstrate how drug testing could be carried out. Illicit drugs would not be used in the demonstration. Such a demonstration is likely to attract media and public attention, which could help dispel misconceptions and misunderstanding about drug testing. This would help ensure that the ongoing public discussion about drug testing and other approaches to minimising harm from drugs is better informed.

We urgently need an informed public to support not only an effective drug summit, but the implementation of new approaches arising from the drug summit. If we fail to consider new initiatives, including illicit drug testing, we risk more young lives being lost.

Recommendation

It is resolved that Council:

- (A) support proposals for a Drug Summit which brings together Members of Parliament, experts in the medical and social aspects of drug use, community representatives, families, and people with experience of drug use and its effects;
- (B) request that the Drug Summit:
 - (i) examine and make recommendations on actions which could contribute to reducing, ending the harm from illicit drug use; and
 - (ii) specifically consider illicit drug testing, including:
 - (a) hearing evidence on the nature and effectiveness of illicit drug testing on other jurisdictions, including from the individuals and agencies responsible for conducting such testing; and
 - (b) making recommendations on the value of providing for illicit drug testing and how an effective drug testing trial may be conducted in NSW;

- (C) request the Chief Executive Officer to liaise with medical professionals seeking to provide a practical demonstration of how drug testing may be conducted, with the aim of providing them with a suitable City facility at no charge, provided that the demonstration does not involve the use of illicit substances; and
- (D) request the Lord Mayor to write to the Premier, the Leader of the Opposition, the Leaders of other Parties in the NSW Parliament and Independent MPs to provide them with this Lord Mayoral Minute and request them to support the City's proposal.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor

Moved by the Chair (the Lord Mayor) –

That the minute by the Lord Mayor be endorsed and adopted.

Carried unanimously.

S051491