

No quick fix

Each town, each city, each State in Australia has its own story to tell about drugs and the problems they cause for the community. As part of its inquiry into substance abuse, the House of Representatives Family and Community Affairs Committee is visiting communities throughout Australia to listen to people's ideas on how to deal with the problems and hear their stories. The Committee recently visited Perth and held a public hearing, met with government and non-government agencies, and asked local organisations what they are doing to reduce drug-related harm in Western Australia.



At Cyrenian House, a therapeutic rehabilitation centre in Perth, Family and Community Affairs Committee members Barry Wakelin (standing left) and Graham Edwards (foreground) talk with Gerard Haughton, Judge of the District Court of Dublin (right) about ways to overcome drug abuse.

Throughout the three day visit, the House Committee spoke with prisoners, residents of a therapeutic community, members of a local drug action group at a high school, and clients of the Perth Naltrexone Clinic about what needs to be done to reduce drug-related harm. Committee members also participated in a forum convened by the Western Australian Network of Alcohol and other Drug Agencies.

At Nyandi Women's Prison, the Committee was briefed by staff about how the prison deals with the drug dependency problems

of women in their custody. Committee members had the chance to meet and talk with prisoners who spoke openly about their struggles with heroin addiction. Several said they were grateful for the chance the prison gave them to access the relapse prevention medication naltrexone, which works as a protection against relapse by blocking the effects of heroin.

The Committee heard more about naltrexone when it visited Next Step, a specialist government service provider, and a private Perth naltrexone clinic in Subiaco. At the private clinic Committee members learned about the use of naltrexone for rapid detoxification from heroin, but also about the role of social support in maintaining drug-free status. A 'buddy system' was recommended as a way of ensuring that people recently withdrawn from heroin continue to take naltrexone on a daily basis to prevent the possibility of relapse.

The dire consequences of a heroin relapse were brought home to Committee members when a witness at the public hearing spoke of the loss of her daughter to a heroin overdose. The daughter had stopped taking her naltrexone. The woman's moving experience highlighted to the Committee that there are no quick fixes.

"We are in the early stages of our substance abuse inquiry and we understand that the drug debate is complex and wide-ranging," said Family and Community Affairs Committee Chair, Barry Wakelin, Member for Grey (South Australia). "We're determined to talk and meet with as many people as possible, so we can deliver a report to Parliament that will advance the level of public debate and provide effective recommendations that will improve the community management of the issue."

The Family and Community Affairs Committee will continue to visit local communities around Australia. It is planning to hold a public hearing in Adelaide on 21 November and in Melbourne on 23 November.

The Drug Abuse inquiry began in April 2000 and the House Family and Community Affairs Committee has already received more than 200 letters and submissions.

For more details on the inquiry, copies of the public submissions and for more information on the upcoming public events, contact the Family and Community Affairs Committee on (02) 6277 4566, email: fca.reps@aph.gov.au or visit: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/fca