director’s report

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Cannabis use, particularly in remote communities, among indigenous Australians is following the opposite trajectory to the decline in use we are seeing among the general community. We are collaborating with Associate Professor Alan Clough and his team from James Cook University and Queensland Police in the demand reduction activities extending from the Weed it Out project conducted by Queensland Police in Far North Queensland. Unfortunately, our first collaborative attempt at securing National Health and Medical Research Council funding for this work in a number of Cape York and Torres Strait Island communities was unsuccessful but we will join with Alan in his resubmission in 2009. In the meantime, he and his team have been working hard in the communities to undertake extensive consultation and data collection on local cannabis-related issues and potential community-led solutions. He is in the process of feeding this information back for community comment this month.

NCPIC has funded the first consultation and training workshop with community nominated representatives to inform the development of key messages and begin the process of resource development. This workshop took place in early November in Cairns. Prior to the workshop I conquered (almost) my fear of small planes, and along with representatives of the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing (Kerry Howard and Michelle Ricketts), joined Alan and Detective Senior Sergeant Mick Dowie on a tour of some participating Cape communities.

We met with community members in Lockhart River, and Badu and Thursday Islands. Many thanks to the Queensland Police for providing NCPIC with this opportunity to more fully understand the issues facing these remote communities (and see some fabulous Australian landscapes).

The workshop took place at the Wuchopperen Health Service in Cairns and included community members from eight indigenous communities in Far North Queensland, ranging from members of local councils, community justice groups, men’s and women’s groups, drug and alcohol, and mental health workers. Paul Dillon led part of the workshop on resilience and assisted participants to develop key messages around cannabis for their communities. Other topics dealt with at the workshop included the latest research about the health effects of cannabis (including mental health), legal issues and planning how the project can provide information and support to individuals and communities facing cannabis-related issues.

What stood out clearly during the course of the workshop was the participants’ concern that cannabis use is not part of their culture and that efforts to tackle cannabis-related problems must be undertaken with a ‘whole of community’ focus. NCPIC intends to embrace this message in its future development of resources and related activities with these and a range of other remote, rural and urban indigenous communities nationally.

Our consortium partner, NDRI will also be working with us through their project developing primary health care guidelines for primary health care providers in indigenous communities.

Avant Card postcard release

NCPIC will soon be releasing a new Avant Card postcard, this time focussing on cannabis and driving. The message that cannabis adversely affects a driver’s concentration and reaction time, and can increase the risk of an accident by 2 to 3 times will be delivered in this campaign. The eye-catching postcard will be distributed across Australia to a range of venues including cafes and coffee shops.
This is my last Director’s report for 2008 as I’m taking leave during December. I would like to thank my fabulous staff. They have been working creatively and diligently this year. It is a highly talented team and a privilege to work with them. We are very pleased to welcome a key new staff member next month, Dr Melissa Norberg. Melissa is our new National Manager of Clinical Services and Evaluation. She has a strong clinical and research interest in anxiety in the US and Australia and will be a great asset in assisting us to develop resources, training and interventions for comorbid anxiety, depression and cannabis use disorder. She will introduce more about herself in the next E-Zine.

I would also like to thank our NCPI C Advisory Committee, particularly our consortium partners who are proving it is possible to function as a genuine consortium. Finally, I’d like to thank Virginia Hart, Tania Browne and Daniel Mogg from the Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing who work with us closely and collaboratively, for their support of NCPI C and our (sometimes) challenging mix of activities!

Best wishes for the holiday season and a great 2009.

Above: Community members from 8 indigenous communities in FNQ region attended. Participants included members of: local councils; community justice groups, men’s and women’s groups; drug and alcohol and mental health workers.

Research publications

Relevant publications examining issues to do with cannabis that have been published in the last month include the following:


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community on research
vaporised ‘street’ cannabis: less risky?
A comment on Bloor, Wang, Španěl, and Smith (2008)
Dr Anthony Arcuri

Bloor et al. (2008) examined the presence of chemical compounds in cannabis cigarette smoke and in cannabis vaporized by two types of electric heating devices commercially available in the UK, with a particular focus on ammonia. The researchers analysed both mainstream smoke (i.e., the smoke inhaled and exhaled by cannabis smokers) and sidestream smoke (the smoke emitted from a smouldering ‘joint’ or ‘cone’) from the cannabis cigarettes, which contained standard 3% cultivated cannabis, imported from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). In contrast, the cannabis vapours emitted by the electric heating devices were derived from samples of ‘street’ cannabis seized by the local police force.

The authors revealed that the air samples from their vaporised ‘street’ cannabis contained ammonia levels of up to 170 parts per million (p.p.m.). Sidestream smoke from the cannabis cigarettes of known origin and potency was found to contain ammonia levels of 250 p.p.m., whereas mainstream smoke from these cigarettes contained peak ammonia levels of 10 p.p.m. The researchers also found other compounds present at lower levels across all conditions — acetaldehyde, methanol, acetone, acetic acid and uncharacterised terpenites.

Given that ammonia is toxic at levels greater than 35 p.p.m. (exposure to which has been associated with neurobehavioural impairment, asthma provocation, and bronchial hyperactivity), these results suggest that concentrated ‘street’ cannabis vapours derived from electric heating devices contain toxic levels of ammonia. In contrast, although the sidestream smoke from the cannabis cigarettes of known constitution and potency contained ammonia at toxic levels (which remains a concern for passive cannabis smokers), the filtered mainstream smoke (as inhaled by cannabis users) did not reach such toxic levels.

Bloor et al. noted that some harm reduction messages have communicated that administering cannabis via ‘vapourisers’ is a safer alternative than inhaling smoke directly from burning cannabis. It appears, however, that these messages (which may have been garnered from studies using apparatus insensitive to products such as ammonia) have been challenged by the results of the current study.

In arriving at their conclusions, the researchers failed to acknowledge that the chemical compounds measured in this study were derived from two very different cannabis sources; standardised cannabis cigarettes and ‘street’ cannabis of unknown origin or potency, that are not strictly comparable. Nonetheless, on its own, the finding that electrically vapourised ‘street’ cannabis contained toxic levels of ammonia warrants further research attention.

plans to repeal the Cannabis Infringement Notice scheme”. However, he states that he is not claiming this is a consequence of the CIN scheme, but rather, the decline follows a national trend that began before the scheme’s introduction. He says, “more evidence-based public discussion about the health harms of cannabis, combined with more negative views towards smoking generally, are likely to explain the drop, particularly among the youth”. Lenton writes, “cannabis use should primarily be treated as a health issue”. He emphasises that recriminalising cannabis use is not likely to reduce use but will instead act as a deterrent to users seeking help for cannabis-related problems.

the generation that inhaled
Sydney Morning Herald: November 6, 2008
Miranda Devine writes about a number of high profile politicians’ cannabis use admissions and how “politicians should not be afraid of accusations of hypocrisy, but heed mounting evidence that marijuana is not the benign drug it was once thought”. She stresses the importance of young people not using cannabis, due to their “exquisitely vulnerable brains”. She further states that “recent research suggests that, without cannabis, the incidence of schizophrenia would drop by at least 10 per cent”. She says in recent years, there has been a shift away from seeing cannabis as a relatively “benign” drug and that “young people and those with a genetic predisposition to schizophrenia are most at risk”. At the end of the article, she concludes that the drop in cannabis use among young people, as evidenced in the results of recent National Drug Strategy Household Surveys is due to the “Tough on Drugs strategy of the Rudd and Howard governments”. Ms Devine raises some important points concerning the harms associated with cannabis use and the role of informed politicians’ comments on cannabis use for raising awareness of these issues. It is unlikely that the significant reductions in levels of cannabis use, however, are solely attributable to any one government strategy, as such reductions have been seen internationally across a range of policy environments.

aboriginals need health help: Stanley
West Australian: November 7, 2008
Former Australian of the Year, Prof Fiona Stanley, is quoted in this article as saying “to bring in alcohol restrictions without rehabilitation, support, trauma counselling, mental health support, suicide prevention, safe houses for the women and support for the families is inhumane”. She further warns, “You must be very careful because as soon as you remove the grog, in comes the marijuana—when they brought in Opal (lead-free) petrol in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands, in came the dope. What you haven’t asked is why Aboriginal people drink so much”. She cites the continuing effects of the Stolen Generation as a contributing factor to the problem.

museum and HEMP Bar back in business
Northern Rivers Echo: November 13, 2008
This article covers the re-opening of the Nimbin Museum and the Nimbin HEMP Bar, which were facing closure. The “landlords of both buildings were advised several weeks ago they would have to comply with a strict set of conditions or police would declare them ‘restricted premises’”.

hurdles for youth on the way ahead
Northern Star: November 15, 2008
A lack of affordable public transport and “safe venues to see bands and hang out with friends, and the easy accessibility to drugs and alcohol” in Northern New South Wales are causing problems for the region’s youth. A variety of young people explain how these issues are affecting them. Ahri Tallon thinks the reason why so many young people in the area smoke cannabis is due to them observing their parents using the drug and considering it “socially acceptable”.

alcohol, cannabis top the list for drug treatment
Australian Medicine: November 17, 2008
Data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare’s report, Alcohol and other drug treatment services in Australia 2006-07, shows that alcohol and cannabis are the first and second most common drugs people seek...
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It seems to be in contrast with the bulk of studies in humans...Regular heavy cannabis use is associated with memory impairment and damage to brain regions involved in memory and learning”.

**drug lessens pain like pot**

*MX: November 24, 2008*

Scientists from the Scripps Research Institute in California have “found a way to activate a pain-relieving protein in the body usually stimulated by marijuana”. A drug has been found that deactivates an enzyme, “which then allows the protein to be effective in dampening pain”.

**meth, cocaine popular in NSW**

*News Mail: November 24, 2008*

Data discussed at the 2008 National Drugs Trends Conference in Sydney, sourced from the *Illicit Drugs Reporting System (IDRS)*, shows that among the 151 NSW drug users interviewed, methamphetamine and cocaine were more likely to be named their ‘drug of choice’ than in other Australian states and territories. However, these NSW users were the “least likely to list cannabis as their ‘drug of choice’”.

**first drink comes early for today’s teenagers**

*The Age: November 26, 2008*

Researchers at Flinders University in Adelaide are concerned that today’s teenagers are first consuming alcohol at age 15, “up to eight years earlier than their mothers, putting them at greater risk of dependence, mental health problems and drug addiction”. Toby Freeman, lead researcher, is concerned by this and says, it “does set someone up as more likely to engage in risky behaviour, use tobacco, marijuana or illicit drugs”.

**end hempseed food ban: businessman**

*The West Australian: November 29, 2008*

Kim Hough, Chief Executive of Hemp Resources, wants the “Federal Government to lift a ban on the sale of hempseed foods and oils for human consumption, arguing they have a better balance of essential fatty acids than popular fish oil”. Presently, the Australian food standard lists “hemp foods illegal for human ingestion”. Hempseed and its oil are derived from cannabis leaves but don’t contain THC, the active constituent in the plant which has “psychotropic properties”.

Mr Hough, from Perth, has written to his local MP and Foreign Affairs Minister, Stephen Smith about the issue.

**katie’s message**

*Hills Gazette: November 29, 2008*

This article celebrates Katie Johnston’s achievement in gaining a highly commended prize for her entry into the NCPIC 2008 Poster Competition. Katie’s poster, *Not Thinking, Sinking!* impressed the NCPIC judging panel with its creativity, originality and effectiveness in portraying the message to get help if people are experiencing problems with their cannabis use. Katie is a Year 9 student from Mundaring Christian College in Western Australia.

**net may widen for drug drivers**

*Sunday Times: November 30, 2008*

A review to be conducted by Adelaide University’s Centre for Automotive Safety Research will assess if roadside drug testing should be conducted not only by Western Australian traffic police, but also by country police and general duties officers in the state. Data from WA Police “shows one in 22 people have tested positive for drug driving since roadside testing was introduced in October last year”. Over 80 per cent of these tested positive for methamphetamine. The drug testing kits “target THC, the active ingredient of cannabis, amphetamines and ecstasy”.

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**ncpic e-zine – November 2008**

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**ncpic contact details**

NCPIC is a consortium led by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre and is an Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing initiative.

For further information on NCPIC, its work and activities please contact Clare Chenoweth on (02) 9385 0218

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