

Inquiry into decriminalisation of illicit drugs – an opportunity to align policy with evidence-based practice

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Introduction: Criminalisation is ineffective in reducing drug harms, and in fact increases them through unnecessary engagement with the judicial and prison systems. Sadly, Australia's approach to illicit drugs to date has been largely based on criminalising them. The ACT decriminalised possession of small amounts of cannabis in 1989. The ACT Parliament has introduced a Decriminalisation Bill that proposes partial decriminalisation of offences for possession of small amounts of several illicit drugs.

Translating evidence-based research into practice in Australia: Decriminalising personal use of cannabis in the ACT did not lead to increased drug usage, and promoted treatment seeking. Experience in over 30 countries shows the same.

Effective treatment and harm reduction measures include opioid replacement therapy, supervised injection sites, and therapy based on individualised assessment. There is considerable evidence, including Cochrane reviews and randomised control trials, for these treatments.

Policy developments to date: Personal use of cannabis has been decriminalised in ACT, SA and NT, but to date other drug use remains criminalised, with many treatment options unavailable. The 2021 Victorian enquiry into cannabis decriminalisation and 2021 ACT Inquiry show the tide of public and political opinion is now turning away from criminalisation and towards public health promotion.

Discussions and Conclusions: It is very likely the ACT Bill will be passed. It should provide an inspiring precedent for other jurisdictions to treat illicit drug use as a social and health issue. There should be increased investment in evidence-based specialist drug treatment services to meet demand and promote positive health impacts.

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