

## **Changes in Australian Drug Policy 1996-2016: How did we do?**

Annie Bleeker<sup>1</sup>, Paul Dillon<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Alcohol Tobacco And Other Drug Association of the ACT Inc, Canberra, Australia, <sup>2</sup>Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia, Sydney, Australia.

**Presenters email:** [annie.bleeker@atoda.org.au](mailto:annie.bleeker@atoda.org.au)

In 2019, interviews were conducted with nine Australian drug policy experts who were asked what they believed were key changes in drug policy between 1996 and 2016. This study formed part of a seven-country report commissioned by the University of Amsterdam to investigate Illicit Drug Policies and Social Outcomes. This presentation will cover the results of the Australian arm of the study.

The launch of the 'Tough on Drugs' policy in 1997 was regarded by all as the most important change in drug policy during the timeframe of the study, having significant and lasting effect on almost all areas, most particularly policing and treatment. Although criticised by many at the time, those interviewed acknowledged that there was significant investment in diversion and expansion of treatment programs. This also led to the non-government organisations (NGO) sector becoming a major provider of treatment, as well as ensuring a more professionalised AOD workforce.

All experts believed that Australia had done particularly poorly around prevention, with those changes identified being seen as opportunistic and politically motivated rather than a part of a larger, long-term strategy. The other area of concern was harm reduction, with the most significant changes in this area (i.e., the introduction of NSPs and methadone programs) occurring in Australia before 1996. Although there are still occasional successes in this area (e.g., naloxone), the reluctance by successive federal and state governments to support harm reduction initiatives continues to polarise the general community about the potential benefits of this policy.

**Disclosure of interest:** None to disclose