



# Inquiry into whether young people are taking enough personal responsibility for reducing and preventing substance abuse or should this be government's role?

## Recommendation

The report of the Health Committee makes the following recommendations to the Government:

- that the Government provide substance abuse prevention programmes to all children starting at year 5, with gradual exposure, as a basic standard
- that the Government implement a youth-targeted substance abuse prevention advertising campaign, focused on honesty and transparency
- that Government develop a national policy for schools to implement compulsory substance abuse prevention education, and support schools to add their own supplementary programmes
- that youth-led peer support and mentoring programs be delivered through local community groups and schools to help young people make informed decisions on substance abuse.

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## Introduction

The purpose of this report is to summarise our consideration of whether young people are taking enough personal responsibility for reducing and preventing substance abuse or whether this should be the government's role.

We heard from three organisations with particular knowledge of preventing substance abuse.

## Ministry of Health

We heard from the Acting Director-General of Health that there is a role for both the Government and young people to take responsibility for reducing and preventing substance abuse. There is evidence that restricting the advertising and branding of and increasing the taxation on a substance such as tobacco, can reduce its use. However, those

addicted to the substance may find alternatives to feed their habits, such as psychoactive substances.

In this situation, hospitals and general practitioners will continue to provide advice, supplemented by services in the community, providing a holistic response.

### **New Zealand Drug Foundation – Te Tuapapa Tarukino o Aotearoa**

The New Zealand Drug Foundation told us that preventing substance abuse is a shared responsibility of Government and young people. It can involve supporting youth to make informed decisions and develop their own solutions. We heard that schools should provide a wrap-around service combining advice, appropriate information, and support to students and their families. A “youth specific”, nationwide service should be rolled out to allow the public to access the information collected by government information on illegal substances.

### **Hauora Waikato Group**

The Hauora Waikato Group believes that young people have a good understanding of what is happening in their world and could do more to prevent substance abuse. Both the Government and young people have a role to play in this. We also heard about the role whānau can play in preventing young people abusing substances.

### **Early intervention**

We believe that early intervention through educational programmes to prevent substance abuse is essential. They should start at year 5 so that children have reliable information on which to base the formation of their attitudes to the abuse of substances, regardless of their legal class. Education provided at this age should begin with alcohol and tobacco.

Exposure to information about harsher substances should gradually increase over the years. We believe this approach will support life-long understanding and good decision-making regarding substance abuse. We believe that the government is best placed to enforce a basic standard for schools' provision of such a programme. Schools would then be supported, and encouraged to develop their own supplementary programmes if they deem it necessary.

### **School policy**

We heard that continued attendance at school is an important factor in safeguarding young people against substance abuse. The traditional approach of not talking about substance abuse and expelling students caught abusing substances needs to change. Schools need to engage with this issue and follow a Government policy of inclusion and support. This is best done by implementing programmes by youth, for youth, in schools and in the community, delivering information that young people can understand. We believe that peer-led initiatives in schools would be more effective at reducing substance misuse than teachers and other authority figures talking down to young people. Young people could thus take responsibility for reducing substance misuse.

### **Social and cultural aspect**

We believe that attitudes to substance abuse in wider society need to change in order to achieve a reduction in substance abuse among young people. We were particularly concerned about the social acceptance of alcohol abuse and the peer pressure on young people to drink. We were also concerned about families experiencing multi-generational use of illegal drugs. A culture shift is necessary to recognise substance abusers as victims

rather than criminals. A complex approach will be required to dealing with these diverse issues. Young people need support to break a cycle of substance abuse. We believe that programmes of peer support and mentoring from young people and adults who have emerged from such a background would benefit young people. These programmes should be supported financially by government and administered by both schools and community groups. Peer support and discussion of substance misuse from youth mentors rather than teachers would have more credibility with young people. This would also help to remove the stigma of talking about a history of substance abuse.

### **Media**

An advertising campaign specifically targeted at youth would be effective as we recognise the influence media has on young people. This campaign would be targeted at both illegal drugs and synthetic highs. We recommend that a balance be struck between humour and serious messages to illustrate the full harms of substance abuse. These advertisements would also illustrate the support that users can find.

### **Conclusions**

We agree with submitters that both government and young people have a role to play in reducing and preventing substance misuse as set out in our recommendations above.

## **Appendix**

### **Committee procedure**

The committee met on 16 and 17 July 2013 to consider the inquiry. The committee heard 3 submissions. Evidence was heard from the Ministry of Health, New Zealand Drug Foundation – Te Tuapapa Tarukino o Aotearoa and Hauora Waikato Group.

### **Committee members**

Jesse Medcalf (Chairperson)

Jack Alison

Angela Curtis

Cian Gardner

Allanah Hartley

Victoria Holyoake

Matthew Jackson

Gursharn Kaur

Shivon Kiew

Mungo Mason

Danielle Rolls

Charm Skinner

Amy Williams