



CAUSES OF HEROIN SHORTAGE REVEALED IN NEW REPORT

12 November, 2004

For release: 12 November, 2004

Contrary to many widely offered explanations of the Australian heroin "shortage", high-level, internationally focused law enforcement operations probably played a significant role in reducing heroin supply to this country in 2001, according to research released today in Brisbane.

These are the findings from the Causes, Course and Consequences of the Heroin Shortage in Australia Project, research co-ordinated by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales and funded by the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund (NDLERF).

During the late 1990s an increase in the availability and purity of heroin caused great concern for law enforcement and health authorities across Australia. However in early 2001 heroin supply decreased across the country. This became widely known as the 'heroin drought'.

Dr Louisa Degenhardt, Chief Investigator of the project and Senior Lecturer at NDARC said that some of the findings will prove surprising to some.

"One of the most important implications of the heroin shortage is that it appears that it is possible under some circumstances for law enforcement to accomplish a substantial reduction in the availability of imported drugs like heroin. It is most likely the result of actions aimed at the very high levels of drug trafficking. This suggests the importance of maintaining programs at that high level and of developing a better understanding of how such interventions affect supply."

The heroin market in Australia was well established by the late 1990s, but it had a low profit margin, with high street level heroin purity, lower than ever before cost, and a large number of seizures that had increased risk to importers. The increased funding of the Australian Federal Police and the Australian Customs Service as part of the National Illicit Drug Strategy probably made the risks of importation greater.

The combination of low profits and increased success of law enforcement probably led to the reduced dependability of key suppliers of heroin to Australia. This occurred against a backdrop of gradually declining production in South East

Asia. These factors may have reduced the attractiveness of Australia as a destination for heroin trafficking.

The consequences of the shortage were also examined in the project.

Heroin supply reduction appeared to have mixed health effects upon different groups of heroin users. Younger (less entrenched) heroin users appeared to be particularly affected by the reduction in heroin supply, with many indicators suggesting that they might have ceased (or substantially reduced) heroin use, and switched to psychostimulants.

However, older, more entrenched users had smaller reductions in harms related to heroin use.

“This group appeared to shift to other risky forms of drug use, which particularly included the injection of pharmaceuticals such as benzodiazepines,” reported Dr Degenhardt. ‘However because harm reduction initiatives were in place, the harms associated with these risky forms of drug use may have been reduced. If the shortage had occurred in countries where harm reduction and treatment services were not in place, it is highly likely that these risk behaviours would have resulted in significant increases in drug related harm.”

“This research shows quite clearly that Australia’s harm minimization policy is one that should be maintained and supported.”

ends

For further information contact Paul Dillon

9385 0226 (W)
0419 402 099 (M)