

1997 Drug Aware Campaign Heroin Prevention Phase

Introduction

The first phase of the Drug Aware Campaign was launched in October 1996 and ran to March 1997. It targeted parents to increase their knowledge about illicit drugs and aimed to encourage effective communication between parents and young people about drug use issues.

The next phase of Drug Aware, undertaken in September 1997 and ran to January 1998, focused on heroin use and included two public education elements. The first was the continuation of the strategy to raise parents' awareness initiated in the first phase of Drug Aware and developed in response to the post campaign research. The second, a heroin use prevention strategy targeted young people at risk of using heroin.

In 1995, Australian research from the National Drug Strategy Household Survey indicated that one per cent of people aged 14 years and over had tried heroin and 0.4 per cent had used it in the last year. This research indicates that the majority of people have never used heroin.

Prevalence data suggests that use appears to peak when people are in their twenties. Use decreases significantly in the later twenties and into the thirties when it decreases to very low levels.

It is popularly reported by the police, alcohol and other drug workers and young people that heroin is more widely available than several years ago. This follows an estimated doubling of world production. This means that more people can be expected to be exposed to, or have greater access to, its use.

Given the increased availability of heroin, it is important to motivate people not to use or to postpone the use of heroin. The patterns of use suggest that delaying onset of heroin use is an important prevention strategy. If people in their early twenties can be convinced to delay use until their late twenties, the prevalence data suggests use may be avoided altogether or be shorter in duration.

Aims of the strategy

The heroin prevention strategy is aimed at motivating people to continue to not use the drug. The target group was young people aged 16 to 24 years who were considered to be at risk of using the drug. People were defined to be at risk if they had used other illicit drugs.

This target group was determined after a review of literature and consultation with a reference group with representatives from the Health Department, the Alcohol and Drug Authority, the National Centre for Research into the Prevention of Drug Abuse, Curtin University's Addiction Studies Unit and the West Australian Drug Abuse Strategy Office.

A review of the literature and subsequent discussion with the reference group found research that identified the motivators for heroin use. However, research failed to identify the motivators for people who chose **not** to use heroin.

Qualitative research

Qualitative research with the target group was undertaken to gather information to assist with the development of appropriate public education strategies. The research objectives were to determine:

- Σ what motivates young people, who are at risk, not to use heroin;
- Σ salient issues affecting young people, who are at risk, not to use heroin; and
- Σ how communication with the target group affects their decision not to use heroin.

Qualitative research was undertaken with five focus groups with a total of 37 people participating. Discussion with the focus groups was conducted during one week in August 1997.

Non heroin users

Participants of four groups were aged between 16 and 24 years and had used an illicit drug, but not heroin. The method used to select focus group participants included advertising in particular metropolitan music and clothing stores, tertiary campus noticeboards and tutorials, alcohol and other drug worker networks, and a mailout by a non government peer based alcohol and other drug organisation.

Participants who volunteered were required to ring a telephone number and take part in further screening to establish that they met the selection criteria. Participants were provided with an honorarium for their participation.

Participants were grouped according to social background to promote conversation within the groups. This technique was chosen to improve feelings of comfort and identity with other group members who shared a common social interest.

A common interviewer was used throughout. Questions were designed to generate discussion about "what prevents you from using heroin".

Heroin users

The fifth group included people aged 16 to 24 years who had used heroin up to two times and had discontinued use. The purpose of this group was to identify factors that delayed their initial use of heroin.

Despite screening to limit heroin users to one group, some people who had used the drug once or twice appeared in the non heroin user groups. Eleven of the 32 who participated in the non user groups reported having used the drug. These people did not consider themselves to be heroin users and had identified themselves as non users.

Results

There were four common themes that appeared throughout the four non user groups. They identified why those people interviewed did not use heroin (or had discontinued their experimental use). These themes were fears of dependence, loss of control, loss of friends' respect and loss of friends.

The themes were commonly related to each other. The concept of loss of control was related to dependence. Some respondents expressed concern that if they became dependent they would lose control. The consequences of dependence were losing the respect of friends and perhaps losing friends altogether.

Fear of dependence

Interviewees expressed concern about the effect of heroin. Respondents in each group explained that they were scared of becoming dependent. Dependence was perceived as an undesirable loss of control that has associated negative consequences including loss of friends, loss of others' respect and increased levels of self indulgence.

Other social negatives associated with dependence mentioned by respondents included: social group shrinking with non users drifting away; people with dependency becoming isolated and more introspective; friends not wanting to associate with 'junkies'; regular users not wanting to go out much any more and becoming "boring"; and decreased reliability, trust and respect for people who became dependent.

A commonly expressed serious consequence of continuing use and possible dependence was the subsequent loss of friends.

People with a heroin dependency were considered to be attracted to social groups with a similar interest in heroin use. One respondent summed this up by explaining, *“most drugs come with a lifestyle but heroin becomes the lifestyle”*.

Short term consequences

All groups mentioned some short term consequences that were undesirable. Loss of self control was a commonly recurring theme. While participants acknowledged that people also use to lose control, the desire to avoid losing control was reported to be one reason for continued non use.

Other short term consequences mentioned including placing oneself at risk of overdose, harm by others and vulnerability to violence.

Experimental use appeared to be acceptable to those who had used and to those with friends who had used. Continued use was associated with developing dependence and consequent loss of control. Although health consequences were known, few participants indicated health, including death, as a motivator for not using. Health was reported as being a minor incentive for not using.

Heroin users

The group in which all participants had used heroin reported disincentives to use which were similar to those reported by non heroin users.

The social consequences of dependence were emphasised. Heroin was seen as a ‘downer’, people with a heroin dependency were believed to be less interested in going out, less trustworthy and less interesting socially.

Implementation

Participants provided advice on the implementation of possible public education communication about heroin.

Non users and users were unanimous about being provided with the facts, enabling them to make informed decisions about their own drug use. They explained that any communication about heroin should focus on the social effects of the drug.

Participants expressed a strong scepticism of any information provided by authority. It was felt information would be seen as more relevant and believable if it was delivered by young people, as they were considered more likely to tell the truth. When providing information, all socio economic groups should be included.

The participants of two groups recommended realism and preferred to be presented with “the real thing and not just a bunch of actors”. The use of scare tactics was addressed by participants from two groups who felt it was not appropriate. However, the use of realistic situations, including horrific scenes, was considered to be acceptable.

The stereotyping of ‘junkies’ was rejected by all groups. While all groups referred to people with a dependency as a ‘junkie’, this term seemed to be the property of the young and not to be used in communications about the issue.

One group remarked on the issue of normalising. Participants commented that most of their friends didn’t use heroin and believe that any communication should support this stance and not imply that everyone is “doing it”.

Conclusion

Research conducted in August 1997 was used in the development of the heroin prevention phase of the Drug Aware Campaign. This research has shown that the key issues motivating young people at risk of using heroin to not use the drug are: fears of dependence, loss of control, loss of friends' respect and loss of friends.

Communications with this group aimed at preventing use or delaying the onset of use should aim to reinforce these beliefs in a non judgemental and non authoritarian way and should be realistic, should not stereotype drug users and should use language which is acceptable to young people.

Note

This document reproduces information contained in a research bulletin by the Health Promotion Services which was published in 1998. It has been slightly edited to take account of more recent phases of the heroin drug aware campaign.

