

***Drugs. Families. Solutions. Getting on with family work. Melbourne, 27–28 June, 2007***

*Drugs. Families. Solutions. Getting on with family work* was the theme of the third annual Family Alcohol and Drug Network (FADNET) conference held in Melbourne in June 2007. In setting the scene for the conference, FADNET executive members Miranda Manning and Alan Murnane spoke of the emergence of FADNET in 2001, when family work was a relatively new practice in the alcohol and drug sector. With other practitioners, they formed the network, acknowledging that family members affected by drug use have a need for support in their own right. They share a common goal for an increase in family-inclusive practice within the alcohol and drug service sector in Australia.

Dr John Herron, Chairman of the Australian National Council on Drugs (ANCD), opened the conference and in his address highlighted the research paper, *Drug use in the family: Impacts and implications for children*.<sup>1</sup> This paper helped set the scene for the meeting, as it examined the impacts of parental substance misuse on family members, specifically children, and identified a number of key points for understanding the nature of drug use in the family and approaches to minimising its harm. Dr Herron went further to express his belief that “unless the community is involved in tackling drug use, you’re not going to succeed”, a sentiment consistent with the thrust of the conference, which focused on interventions and partnerships that improve the health of family members affected by substance use.

The conference incorporated a variety of formats over the two days, with morning keynote addresses on both days, followed by concurrent workshops and presentations throughout the afternoons. A number of poster displays and book/brochure stands were also available for those attending the event.

The first keynote address was from Dr Alex Copello, Clinical Director, Birmingham, and Solihull Substance Misuse Services and Senior Lecturer, School of Psychology at the University of Birmingham. Dr Copello has extensive clinical experience in the fields of addiction and substance misuse, and is involved in the international cross-cultural study, *The Family Coping Project—Family Coping with Alcohol and Drug Problems*, in England, Mexico City and northern Australia.<sup>2</sup> Dr Copello noted that over the past three decades there has been increased recognition by researchers that serious attempts at harm reduction need to take families into account. He advocated broadening the treatment focus to include families as the focus of interventions, and the need for service providers and funding agencies to recognise broader sets of outcomes specific to the family, such as stress, violence, healthcare, and so on.

Dr Copello pointed to the stress-strain-coping-support model of alcohol, drugs and gambling problems and the family, which suggests that substance misuse associated with stress can be analogous with other stresses, such as family disasters (e.g., death), mental health problems and job loss. He reported that, according to studies done by the Birmingham Alcohol, Drugs and Addiction Research Group, levels of stress in families affected by substance misuse are actually higher than those receiving the actual treatment, and much higher than control groups. Noted examples of interventions in the UK include: Social Behaviour and Network Therapy (SBNT),<sup>3</sup> which works with people with drug problems and their networks; and 5 Step Family Intervention, an outline of which Dr Copello presented in workshops throughout the remainder of the day.

Dr David Best, Senior Lecturer of Addictions, Department of Psychology, University of Birmingham, and project lead of the Addictions Research Group, presented key findings on the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs’ *Hidden Harm* report.<sup>4</sup> The report examined the risks to children of substance-using parents, and sought to: estimate the number of children affected by “problem”<sup>5</sup> drug use in the UK; examine the consequences; consider the involvement of all types of services; identify best policy and practice; and make recommendations on future policy and practice. Collecting useful data on clients was a persistent problem throughout the study, with only 68% of specialist services in the study recording whether the clients had dependent children. Key areas of policy and practice development discussed in the report include: improvements in data collection; information sharing and case linkage between

1 [www.ancd.org.au/publications/research\\_papers.htm](http://www.ancd.org.au/publications/research_papers.htm)

2 [www.addictions.bham.ac.uk/projects.htm](http://www.addictions.bham.ac.uk/projects.htm)

3 [www.addictions.bham.ac.uk/projects.htm](http://www.addictions.bham.ac.uk/projects.htm)

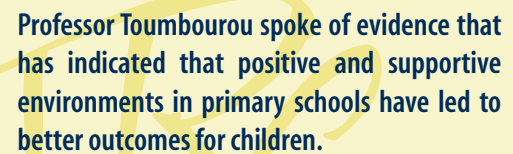
4 <http://drugs.homeoffice.gov.uk/publication-search/young-people/hidden-harm-report>

5 “Problem” drug use was considered to be drug use with serious negative consequences of a physical, psychological, social and interpersonal, financial or legal nature for users and those around them.

agencies; joint training and inter-agency protocols; the “ownership” of joint work between agencies that is then linked to targets and evaluation of impact; strategic planning and development.

Professor John Toumbourou completed the major presentations for day one by discussing the prevention of harmful drug use by enhancing family involvement in schools. Professor Toumbourou is Professor and Chair in Health Psychology at the School of Psychology, Deakin University, and an Honorary Associate with the Murdoch Children's Research Institute. He discussed the worrying trends in Australia since the 1980s, in which a general decrease in alcohol and drug use has occurred for all groups except young women. Professor Toumbourou claimed that we are failing to effectively monitor the developmental harm of this increased use on the children of young women.

Professor Toumbourou spoke of evidence that has indicated that positive and supportive environments in primary schools have led to better outcomes for children. This premise has been investigated in the secondary school setting with the Resilient Families Study,<sup>6</sup> conducted with colleagues at the Centre for Adolescent Health. The study aims to determine whether introducing factors through early secondary school directed towards increasing family resilience can prevent the development of health and social problems and boost adjustment capabilities and educational outcomes.



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Workshops and presentations throughout the remainder of the day covered areas such as building relationships between children and non-residential parents, work with young pregnant substance abusers, and repair work with family members.

In the first keynote for day two, Dr Michael Robbins, Research Associate Professor at the Center for Family Studies at the University of Miami, Miller School of Medicine, presented various models of family therapy. These included Brief Strategic Family Therapy (BSFT), which has been successfully applied with children and adolescents as a “prevention, early intervention and intervention strategy for delinquent and substance-abusing adolescents”.<sup>7</sup> He reported on high volumes of successful training, where around 70% of trained therapists seemed to be able to treat substance-abusing adolescents and do more good than harm. Dr Robbins believes that family therapy is able to achieve far greater levels of effective intervention than those on an individual basis, partly due to better engagement and retention of clients.

The CEO of Odyssey House,<sup>8</sup> Dr Stefan Gruenert, then presented some of the key points from the national workshop on Parent Substance Use and Child Protection: Developing National Guidelines and Strategies, co-hosted by the Australian Institute of Family Studies<sup>9</sup> and Odyssey House, Victoria, in Melbourne on Monday 25 June. This satellite event to the FADNET conference involved the development of a national framework and agenda to tackle the problems of child maltreatment associated with parental substance abuse. One of the main contributors to the draft framework and agenda, Professor Dorothy Scott, Director of the Australian Centre for Child Protection at the University of South Australia,<sup>10</sup> was present when it met unanimous endorsement from attendees.

Dr Dan Lubman from the Orygen Research Centre at the University of Melbourne discussed youth comorbidity (substance abuse and mental health disorder) and the implications for families in the final keynote. Dr Lubman spoke of the costs of caring for a comorbid family member and the needs of the carers, including better information, stress-coping mechanisms, help in solving a variety of problems, and increased social supports. He noted that adolescents with comorbidities have significantly poorer outcomes, and advocated an integrated approach to service delivery in this area.

Workshops and presentations that completed the meeting included various presentations on working with culturally and linguistically diverse families, an insight into the Centacare NT Indigenous Family Coping<sup>11</sup> program, and the importance of men in coping with substance misuse in the family. A post-conference workshop on Brief Strategic Family Therapy, with Professor Michael Robbins, was held the following day, wrapping up a busy week for all involved. Select presentations are available for download via the FADNET website at [www.odyssey.org.au/fadnet](http://www.odyssey.org.au/fadnet)

6 [www.rch.org.au/cah/research.cfm?doc\\_id=10588](http://www.rch.org.au/cah/research.cfm?doc_id=10588)

7 [www.cfs.med.miami.edu/Docs/ClinicalApproach.htm](http://www.cfs.med.miami.edu/Docs/ClinicalApproach.htm)

8 [www.odysseyhouse.com.au](http://www.odysseyhouse.com.au)

9 [www.aifs.gov.au/nch/nch\\_menu.html](http://www.aifs.gov.au/nch/nch_menu.html)

10 [www.unisa.edu.au/childprotection/default.asp](http://www.unisa.edu.au/childprotection/default.asp)

11 [www.centacare-nt.org.au/ourservices.php?ID=11](http://www.centacare-nt.org.au/ourservices.php?ID=11)

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