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Breaking down barriers:

Some police officers feel that NSPs see them as being on the other side of the fence, report researchers Catherine Spooner and colleagues who conducted a study to explore the role of Australian police in preventing and reducing drug-related harms. Similarly, some NSP workers in their daily interactions with clients may feel that despite stated organisational policies, the police do not understand harm reduction; and some suggest that police activities can contribute to negative health and social consequences.

The International Harm Reduction Association suggests that many people view NSPs and law enforcement as mutually exclusive. Are they?

According to Dr Ingrid van Beek, Director of the Kirketon Road Centre and the Medically Supervised Injecting Centre in Kings Cross, Sydney, 'We have promoted that drug use be approached as a social and health issue. And drug supply as a law and order issue. Once you get the dialogue going, you find that health workers and police are both motivated by a sense of civic duty. We are just working on different sides of the same coin.'

To the extent that NSPs and law enforcement agencies such as the police have a responsibility for implementing Australia's drug policy of harm minimisation, it is clear that there is a need to find ways for making the partnership work and to engender mutual respect for each other's role. However, there are communication barriers that would need to be surmounted first.

According to Associate Professor Lisa Maher, head of the Viral Hepatitis Epidemiology and Prevention Program at the National Centre in HIV Epidemiology and Clinical Research, the way NSPs

and police see the problem may be different and this can lead to a fundamental lack of trust.

Ingrid observes, 'We spend most of our time engaging and interacting with drug users, hearing about their lives, but only from their perspective. We may not be out there on the street, we're not necessarily the victims of drug-related crime, not there when the elderly lady is brought into hospital after being mugged for her handbag.'

Superintendent Frank Hansen, Manager of the Drug and Alcohol Coordination Unit of NSW Police says 'The role of the constable is often to conciliate or address public disturbance. It is about engaging with people and trying to defuse situations and bring things back into line.'

In their study of the role of police in preventing and minimising illicit drug use and its harms, Catherine Spooner and colleagues provide some examples of police encounters with drug use and drug users. 'Police encounter a wide range of illicit drug-related problems. Public health problems include fatal and non-fatal overdoses, blood-borne virus transmission, and a reduction in the age of initiation of illicit drugs. Crime problems include drug offences, property and violent crime, drug driving, child abuse and neglect, drug-facilitated sexual assault. Public amenity problems include public intoxication, loitering to buy or sell drugs, and unsafely discarded drug-use equipment.'

Frank Hansen reckons that 'Police often see a part of the demographic of drug users – the chaotic end or worst end of it. And you can, if you are not careful, lump that image onto everyone else.

'I think that there is some arrogance that can lead to tensions between health and police at a local level. I used to say up-front that there will be mistakes made by police and Needle and Syringe Programs, but we've got to move on, learn from them, and not harbour any ill feelings,' she says.

The police have been some of the staunchest supporters of harm reduction programs such as NSPs and methadone maintenance programs. The

NSP and police

establishment of the first NSP in Sydney in 1986, and the subsequent enabling amendments to the drug laws in New South Wales, would not have been possible without the support of the police.

Ingrid van Beek cites examples from the late 1980s and early 1990s. 'It was the police here in Kings Cross who lobbied the government to fund a low threshold methadone access program here at Kirketon Road Centre after talking to sex workers on the streets and understanding that they had difficulty accessing methadone programs, especially after hours.'

According to Ingrid, 'The police have a good appreciation of issues that drug users face and at least here at Kings Cross, are pleased that health services have taken the responsibility for these issues.'

Frank reckons that 'police realise that law enforcement is not the sole answer, and that there are other options'.

However, there are other factors that need to be taken into account – for example, community expectations.

'Police can sometimes feel like they are the meat in the sandwich. They may be under considerable pressure from the community, who may have high and sometimes unrealistic expectations,' observes Ingrid van Beek.

Superintendent Frank Hansen agrees. 'I could be going to public meetings and have views jammed down my throat about "what are you doing about these drug users?" People want to feel safe in their communities. Our role is to ensure that people feel safe.'

Lisa Maher suggests that 'it is much easier to identify disjunctures rather than synergies. One way to think about it is that both agencies [NSPs and police] are focused on reducing harm particularly in terms of injecting in public and the impact that this can have for communities.'

For NSPs this may mean engaging with local communities to find out about concerns they may have about drug use in the area, and how the NSP can assist. This may include removing syringe litter from the streets, or engaging clients about disposal issues.

Lisa Maher reckons that this would be a useful starting point for dialogue with the police. 'Police don't want to have to deal with complaints from shopkeepers. They want to do real crime.'

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She suggests that engaging with communities around local drug issues may lead to rewarding outcomes. 'When we were conducting our research into homelessness in Cabramatta in 2001 or 2002, we were surprised that lots of people in communities were more amenable to pragmatic solutions than we realised.'

Catherine Spooner and colleagues, reporting on police attitudes and concern, suggest that focusing on safe disposal may also have a direct benefit for police. Police officers interviewed for the study said that 'safe disposal makes the job safer for police as well' and that 'police don't want to risk needle-stick injuries'.

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