

10 things the government should do to treat P

Client: National Committee for Addiction Treatment (NCAT)

Published: *New Zealand Herald*, 16 November 2009

That strange noise heard across New Zealand on 8 October was the collective sound of every alcohol and drug treatment worker's jaw dropping.

The Prime Minister had just delivered his speech on the government's new initiatives for tackling P addiction and, to our amazement, gave us pretty much everything we've been requesting for the last 10 years.

The approach will tackle New Zealand's P problem from at least five different angles: restricting precursor supply; enhancing law enforcement; increasing treatment availability; improving support and education; and increasing accountability.

But best of all (be still our beating hearts) \$22 million has been set aside for P addiction treatment. That money will allow for improved assessment, more and better treatment programmes and more and better-trained treatment workers. In short, more people will get the help they need when they need it instead of having to wait for months, during which time many lose heart.

It's great news, even if the media almost completely missed its point. The announcement included plenty of meaty matters like forced treatment, tackling gangs, and new powers for customs and police. But the only thing to make headlines was that cold medications will now be harder to get.

Restricting the sale of pseudoephedrine is just one small part of the plan. In fact it is the multi-faceted approach to tackling P that is so encouraging. The devil will be in the emerging details, but by and large the PM appears to have got things right. There is no quick or simple solution and no one silver bullet.

He was also right in admitting the initiatives will not ultimately solve the P problem. The truth is illicit drug use will never go away. In any society, at any point in history, some percentage of the population will be getting high, regardless of the law, and there will always be those who fall prey to the ravages of addiction and drug misuse. We will always need to be there for those who want to overcome those ravages.

So here's our advice to the government as it develops the details for how to spend that \$22 million.

1. There are all sorts of clinical approaches to helping people addicted to P. That's a good thing because all addicts are different and no one approach works for everybody. As you develop new programmes or build on existing ones, make sure variety is maintained.
2. Some people are so addicted to P that they must be removed from society for a time to address their drug dependence. Don't waver from your commitment to provide more detox and residential beds. Find ways to provide even more if you can.
3. Develop the treatment workforce and start right now. Getting qualified people to deal with P addicts takes time, and, because the desire to quit drugs is often tentative, we need skilled people available to help right away.
4. Get the treatment and judicial sectors talking. Make addiction assessment part of the court process and divert addicted criminals to treatment instead of prison. Jails are full of drugs and most addicts will come out in a worse state. Treatment also costs less than jail.
5. Look at the evidence when deciding what to do. There is a lot of emotion and strong opinion on either side of any drug debate. In the end it's not about who's liberal or conservative, or about what will offend the least voters. It's about what will really work in getting people off P.
6. Involve families and communities in treatment wherever you can. People wanting to get off drugs will do better if they know they can return to environments where they are understood and supported.

7. Don't be scared to spend the money. Yes, it's expensive, but every dollar you spend will save New Zealand \$5 in social and health costs further down the track. The human cost in terms of misery and wrecked families is incalculable.
8. By all means get tough on gangs, manufacturers and importers, but don't wage war on P users, who are often unfortunate victims of themselves. If we marginalise and demonise addicts, it just makes it harder for them to seek help.
9. Remember that P may just be the start of an addict's problems. For real rehabilitation to occur, treatment must also take into account things like finding appropriate housing, improving childcare, and helping them disengage from criminal activities.
10. Don't lose heart. People can and do overcome P addiction. With sustained and well-funded resources we can help more to do it and improve the lives of countless individuals, families and children. Your new 'Tackling P' initiatives are an excellent start and you will find the treatment sector is behind you all the way.