

Carter's International Overdose Awareness Day presentation (31 Aug 2017)

Hello.

My name is Carter. I am a father, a musician, a contributing member of society and I have been a drug user.

There have been things that I've enjoyed about it, but it's been a long battle. I've been engaged with support at ReGen for a long time and continue to be. It's not something you'd wish on anyone.

The reason I'm speaking today is that my drug of choice is heroin which, like most people who use heroin, I use intravenously.

Obviously, this type of drug use presents a high risk of overdose.

I have, over the years, lost several close friends to overdose. All were good people who could and would have contributed positively to this world if they had not died in this way. Most recently, this year I lost my best friend from high school to overdose and it continues to happen.

The nature of the drug and the way we use it are intrinsically dangerous. However, I see other factors in society that make it much more dangerous than it should be. The prohibition approach and the stigma around it combine to increase the risks for people like me.

I am not suggesting that there should be no stigma attached to a drug which is so dangerous and life-destroying on so many levels, but making its use illegal and the way it is policed has many adverse effects and very few positives. There is a huge cost to society.

Use is hidden from view. When what you're doing is illegal, you need to hide it: in public toilets, alleyways, front gardens and locked cars. Even though in Victoria we do have facilities to dispose of injecting equipment safely, the way you're treated by police if you have injecting equipment on you (seen as evidence of illegal activity), your instinct is to get rid of it as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, this means that needles are not always disposed of thoughtfully.

As a user, there is no way of knowing the strength or purity of what you are buying or taking. Frankly, you don't even know what it is you're taking. That's all the result of the prohibitionist approach.

While we are probably not about to change government policy overnight, regardless of the evidence, there is one thing that could be done relatively easily to reduce any of the associated harms: a Medically Supervised Injecting Room. It's something that has been talked about a lot in the media lately and there's a clear call from the community for this sort of service.

I have used the Medically Supervised Injecting Room in Sydney. I was in Kings Cross trying to get hold of clean equipment and discovered that this place existed. Frankly, it amazed me that it existed at all.

It's such a different experience. You remain anonymous, the police understand the benefits and keep their distance. You are given a private cubicle and clean equipment and trained staff are on hand should something go wrong. As far as I understand, they've never had an overdose death on the premises.

If you contrast this with Victoria, where you literally have people dying in the streets of Richmond.

We have some good policies in place. There is clean equipment available and we have naloxone programs.

I was encouraged to carry naloxone but, to be frank, it's of no use to me. The reality of me using is me, by myself, hidden, in a locked car. Should I OD, even if I'm carrying naloxone, there'll be no-one there to help me.

I hope that, in time, I can find my way clear of the nightmare that drug addiction is and hope that I can stay alive long enough to do that. I wish the same for anyone else who is going through the same experience. It's a difficult path we've gone down. I don't think anyone's chosen it but I don't think anyone deserves to die for having done so.

Thanks for listening.