

Media Statement

31 August 2021

National Overdose Awareness Day

Tuesday the 31 of August is International Overdose Awareness Day. Globally each year we lose thousands of people from drug overdose. Many more survive but suffer significant harms, including permanent injury. These harms and deaths have devastating impacts on the individual, their families, friends and communities. Each year more Australians die from overdose than road accidents and in 2017, 136 people in South Australia died of drug overdoses compared to 100 traffic fatalities. In addition to the tragic loss of life, the impact of overdose on Australia's health system and economy cannot be understated.

On this International Overdose Awareness Day, 31st August 2021, the South Australian Network of Drug and Alcohol Services (SANDAS) and our members, would like to acknowledge those who have passed due to overdose and their families.

Overdose harms go far beyond lives lost. It is estimated that for every fatal overdose, there are dozens of non-fatal overdoses, most not receiving medical assistance. Overdose can cause significant trauma to the person, their family (especially children) and friends, result in an acquired brain injury, damage to nerves or vital organs like the heart and liver and increase risk of medical conditions including stroke. This may require long term and intensive health interventions putting significant stress on health and welfare services.

In short, the costs of overdose are enormous and enduring.

International Overdose Awareness Day is an opportunity to remember the lives lost to overdose, acknowledge those impacted by overdose, and raise awareness about this misunderstood and stigmatised issue. It also provides an opportunity to increase awareness of practical ways to prevent overdose. Knowing about drugs and what to do when you see someone experiencing an overdose can save lives.

Currently, Australia is not doing enough to address overdose. If nothing changes, hundreds of preventable deaths will continue year on year

There are a number of responses that could make a difference including:

- The development of a comprehensive National Overdose Strategy to provide clear guidance to federal, state and local government on how to best prevent overdose.
- Increased funding for drug treatment services, especially in rural and regional areas, to provide timely access to life saving treatment and support.
- Increased funding for harm reduction services such as needle and syringe programs.
- A national drug testing and early warning system (including pill-testing services) to enable police, emergency services and health professionals to have access to real-time information about drugs.
- Improved alcohol licencing systems that are health not business focussed and a minimum unit price for alcohol in Australia. This has been shown to reduce harmful alcohol use.



www.sandas.org.au
SANDAS is the Peak Body
supporting NGOs delivering
services in the Alcohol and other
Drugs field in South Australia.

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Alcohol is one of the most common drugs involved in overdoses.

- Reform our existing drug laws, including consideration of successful decriminalisation models overseas.
- Further promote the availability and use of opioid antagonist Naloxone, which reverses opioid overdoses and extend the availability of this drug at no cost.
- Establish more medically supervised injecting centres which save lives and provide the opportunity for AOD workers to refer clients into further treatment and support.
- Increase the accessibility of treatments for opioid dependence, including emerging treatments such as long-acting buprenorphine and hydromorphone.
- Increase the capacity of hospitals to deal with drug and alcohol issues, including employing addiction specialists, improving discharge and aftercare processes and increasing access to specialised addiction medicine for those living outside of major cities.

On this day, let us not forget those who have been lost, and those whose lives have been forever changed by their loss. They are our parents, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, partners, and friends. We need changes now that enable access to services and support and eliminate stigma.

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