

ADDICTION ACROSS THE GLOBE

Australia

By Christopher Cussat

Australia is an independent, Western democracy with a population of over 20 million people. It is one of the world's most urbanized countries, with about 70% of the population living in its ten largest cities. Australia's lifestyle reflects its mainly Western origins, but Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people comprise slightly over 2% of the population and many live in rural and remote areas; some still have a broadly traditional way of life that dates back 50,000 to 100,000 years.

Australia is the driest inhabited continent on earth and it is the only nation occupying an entire continent. Geographic isolation of the Australian island-continent for 55 million years created a natural sanctuary for its flora, fauna and marsupials; 400 bird species are found nowhere else. Tourism is one of Australia's largest and fastest-growing industries prompted by the country's sunshine, sandy beaches, vast outback, rainforests, Great Barrier Reef, Gold Coast of Queensland and modern cities. Australia is a friendly, multicultural society that offers a safe, welcoming environment for all.

Highlights of the High Life

Australia has had one of the most outstanding economies of the world in recent years. Similar to other highly industrialized countries with abundant wealth and a high standard of living, Australia also maintains a visible culture of illicit drug usage. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's (AIHW) 2006 *Report on Alcohol and other Drug Treatment Services in Australia*, the following statistics on substance use were recently released based on 135,202 alcohol and drug treatment episodes:

The principal drugs of concern (most popular drugs listed in order of preference) were alcohol (37%), cannabis (23%),

opiates (21% with heroin accounting for 17% of total) and amphetamines (11%).

Over half of those surveyed were involved with at least one other 'most popular drug' in addition to their principal drug.

Top methods of consumption: ingestion (45%), injection (26%) and smoking (25%) were the most likely ways of using the principal drug.

Average age of initial use of alcohol = 17.2 years.

Average age of initial use of illicit drugs = 18.6 years.

Six out of 10 Australians (57.2%) aged 14 years and over had tobacco available for use, whereas 9 out of 10 (90.4%) had alcohol available for use.

Availability of illicit drugs continues to increase every year.

Specifically, the availability of amphetamines, cocaine, ecstasy and kava has increased the most.

Heroin usage has also significantly increased (nearly 15% in a 5-year period).

Alcohol

Alcohol is the most widely used psychoactive (or mood-changing) recreational drug in Australia. *World Drink Trends 2005* reported that Australia was ranked 22 in the world in terms of per capita consumption of pure alcohol, at 7.7 liters per person (per year). In 2004–2005 alcohol was the most common principal drug of concern to clients overall. It was also the most commonly nominated principal drug for both sexes (39% of males and 35% of females). Alcohol is the drug most likely to be reported as the principal drug for clients aged 30 years and over.



In Australia, alcohol is most commonly treated through counseling, followed by withdrawal management (detoxification). According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's 2004 *National Drug Household Survey* of Australians aged 14 and over: 83.6% had consumed alcohol in the previous 12 months, with 41.2% consuming alcohol on a weekly basis and 8.9% on a daily basis. The highest proportion of people consuming alcohol at levels that put them at risk of long-term harm was the 20-29 year age group at 14.7%. Over one-fourth of the 20-29 year age group consumed alcohol at levels that put them at risk of short-term harm at least once a month. The survey also reported

that 24.4% of teenagers (aged 14-19) consumed alcohol on a weekly basis; 10% consumed alcohol at levels that put them at risk of long-term harm; and 16.9% drank at levels that put them at risk of short-term harm.

Statistics on Drug Use in Australia 2004 reported that the consumption of alcohol was a contributing factor in the deaths of 3271 Australians aged 0-64 years. This represents 14% of all drug-related deaths and 2% of all deaths in Australia.

Cannabis

Cannabis is the most widely used illegal drug in Australia. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's 2001 *National Drug Strategy*

Household Survey of Australians aged 14 and over: One in every three had used cannabis at some time in their lives and 13% had used cannabis in the previous 12 months. Males were more likely to use cannabis than females. People aged 20-29 years were more likely to have used cannabis than any other age group. Of those who had used cannabis at some stage in their lives, the mean initiation age was 18.5 years.

In 2004-2005 cannabis was the second most common principal drug of concern to clients overall. It was the second most commonly nominated principal drug for both sexes (24% for males and 21% for females). However, cannabis was the most commonly reported principal drug for closed



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treatment episodes of clients aged 10–29 years of age. It was also the principal drug most likely to be nominated where the client was referred to treatment through a police or court diversion process. Cannabis is most commonly treated with counseling or information and education.

Heroin

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 1.6% of the population had used heroin at some point in their lives and 0.2% had used heroin in the previous 12 months. Males were more likely to have used heroin at some stage in their lives.

In 2004–2005, heroin was the third most popular drug overall. It was the third most commonly nominated principal drug for both sexes (17% for males and 18% for females). The age group with the highest proportion of people who had ever used heroin was 20–29 years. Of this group, males were more than twice as likely to have used heroin as females. For those who had used heroin at some stage of their lives, the mean initiation age was 20.7 years. It is most commonly treated with counseling followed by withdrawal management (detoxification).

Government Intervention

The National Illicit Drug Strategy (NIDS) demonstrates the Australian Government's leadership in the fight against illicit drugs and strengthens its commitment to combat illicit drug use through a sharper focus on reducing the supply of drugs and on reducing demand. Since its launch, the Australian Government has committed more than \$1 billion to the Strategy. The Government also provides additional funding to assist communities and to establish support, advice and mechanisms for families coping with illicit drugs; to provide outreach services; to link and coordinate pathways to health-related counseling services; and to connect them with other NIDS initiatives. This approach stresses the promotion of partnerships among health, law enforcement, educational, non-government, private and industrial organizations in order to address drug issues in a balanced fashion.

Treatment

Wide ranges of treatments are available in Australia to assist people with problems related to their drug use. Treatment options include pharmaceutical-therapies used as part of a maintenance program (methadone, counseling and medical or non-medical withdrawal). Options also exist regarding the environment within which these treatments are conducted (as part of an inpatient or residential program, on an outpatient basis, or with a home-based withdrawal program). A combination of treatments is often recommended to address the physical and psychological complexities of drug use.

Counseling accounted for the highest proportion of

closed-treatment episodes for all principal drugs of concern. Just under half of all treatment agencies were non-government and most were located in major cities and inner regional areas.

These agencies delivered 142,144 closed treatment episodes (an increase from 136,869 episodes reported in 2003–2004).

One-third of clients were aged 20–29 years and more than one-fourth were for clients aged 30–39 years.

Male clients accounted for two-thirds of those treated.

10% involved clients who identified themselves as being of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin.

Counseling was the most common treatment type provided (40%), followed by withdrawal management/detoxification (18%), and then assessment only (12%).

The main treatment for female clients was more likely to be counseling.

Counseling as the main treatment type was more likely among older clients.

37% of involved clients were self-referred, followed by referrals from alcohol and other drug treatment services (12%).

The overall median time of treatment for an episode was 19 days.

Further Information

Many Australia-based online services provide information, research, treatment, counseling and other dependency-related resources. Here are a few, the Australian National Council on Drugs at www.ancd.org.au; the Australian Drug Foundation at www.adf.org.au; the DrugInfo Clearinghouse at druginfo.adf.org.au.

In addition, *Of Substance* covers the latest Australian news and research on alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. It is essential reading for organizations and individuals who provide services to those affected by substance use. Visit www.ofsubstance.org.au for more information. ■



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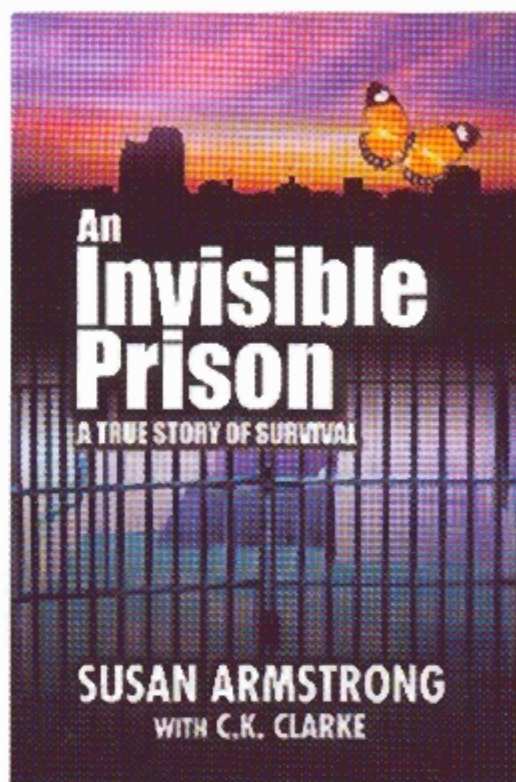
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