



1 OVERVIEW OF APPROACHES TO DRUGS WORK

Young people, by definition, are in transition. This transition process, while generally characterised as a movement from the dependence of childhood to the independence and responsibility of adulthood, actually involves change across the full experience of physical, social, economic and political life.

In this period of change young people are particularly vulnerable. They are changing emotionally and physically, becoming used to being treated in a different way to that of children. An important part of being young is to seek new experiences, try different ways of behaving and, perhaps, to test the limits of new-found freedoms. It is not surprising, then, that drug use and abuse has such a large impact on the lives of young people.

Commonwealth countries have long been concerned that drugs too often turn what should be an exciting and rewarding time of life into a troublesome one. In their meetings in Nassau (1985), Vancouver (1987), and Kuala Lumpur (1989) Commonwealth Heads of Government considered a variety of actions to stem the tide of drug-related problems. Similarly, Commonwealth Health and Law Ministers have considered the medical and legal aspects of the problem at their respective meetings.

Recognising the importance of a youth perspective on what is, largely, a young person's issue, Youth Ministers at the Commonwealth Youth Affairs Council meeting in Apia (1988) asked that a conference of young people involved in the drugs field be organised. The Malaysian Government offered support for the initiative through the provision of the venue and administrative and technical support.

The Conference, 'Dealing in Solutions', was held in Kuala Lumpur in June, 1989. It brought together a group of 72 young people - government officials, youth workers, psychiatrists, ex-addicts and outreach workers - from 46 countries who, through a process of stimulating and creative exchange, sought to develop responses to the problem of drug use and abuse that would be relevant and practical for all Commonwealth countries.

Direct outcomes of the Conference included the compilation and distribution of a Conference Report, development of a training kit for

youth workers in the area of drug use and preparation of a Conference Statement that was considered by Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Kuala Lumpur (October 1989).

This Statement made recommendations on the full range of possible measures to combat the use and abuse of both licit and illicit drugs. The proposed measures covered reducing the demand for drugs, reducing their supply and harm minimisation.

Measures identified to reduce the demand for drugs included:

- prevention programmes, including drug education programmes in both school and non-school settings, incorporation of preventative work into mainstream school curricula and outreach work to the settings where young people gather;
- early intervention and treatment programmes, which acknowledge that drugs are a symptom and not a cause and which add to the currently inadequate store of knowledge about fundamental issues in the drugs field; and
- measures to combat the abuse of alcohol and tobacco, including the banning of advertising of tobacco, controlling the advertising of alcohol and increasing the cost of alcohol and tobacco through the imposition of taxes so that they are beyond the financial reach of young people.

Measures proposed to reduce the supply of illicit drugs included:

- security operations to destroy crops that are the basis of illicit drugs;
- ratification of the 1988 United Nations Convention Against Illicit Trafficking in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances;
- allocation of resources to encourage crop substitution; seizure of financial assets of convicted illicit drugs dealers; and
- stringent legal punishments.

The Harm Minimisation Strategies covered approaches to minimise harm to:

- individual drug users;
- family and friends of drug users; and
- the community.

The concept of Harm Minimisation was an issue that generated a great deal of debate and controversy at the Conference. Some saw it as little more than condoning the use and abuse of drugs by young people, while others saw it as a responsible approach to the realities of young people's involvement with drugs.

The central idea underpinning the concept of harm minimisation is a recognition of the intense difficulty many young people have in coming off drugs. It therefore seeks to assist them to minimise the harm they do to themselves, their families, communities and colleagues through their drug use.

The controversy generated by the concept of Harm Minimisation is an indication that a great deal of further debate on it is required before a final assessment of its validity or otherwise can be made. It was for the purpose of contributing to this debate that the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) decided to publish this paper. The paper itself is based on information presented to the Conference in Kuala Lumpur, but represents only a portion of the work and discussion that occurred at the Conference.

It should be clearly understood that the views and ideas presented in the paper in no way represent the views of CYP, member countries or the formal view of the delegates who attended the Conference. The purpose of publishing the paper is not to add fuel to the controversy over the concept of Harm Minimisation; rather, it is to contribute to a full and open debate about the most appropriate responses to the pressing issue of drug use and abuse by young people.