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## **Community consulted for the first time on attitudes towards drugs**

*Community survey calls for the national drugs budget to be rebalanced in favour of prevention and harm reduction*

**MELBOURNE** – Anex, Australia’s leading non-profit public health organisation on drug issues, today launched the results of Australia’s first community survey on drugs and harm reduction. The survey results expose the need for improved education and awareness surrounding drugs, their affects and responsive public health measures.

Research conducted earlier this year of 500 people ranging from 18 to 79 years has reported the community’s desire to rebalance the current Australian Government’s drug budget. Results from the survey show the community want expenditure allocated to increase funding of prevention initiatives and programs that reduce the harms of drugs for users and the broader community.

Anex’s CEO John Ryan commissioned The Social Research Centre to conduct the *Drug Issues and Harm Reduction: Community Attitudes and Knowledge Survey* so that Anex could ascertain the levels of understanding of drug related issues amongst the general public.

“On the eve of a new national drug strategy being delivered by the Australian Government, this survey on drugs suggests the government should adjust the corresponding budget in order to put more resources into education and harm reduction”, said John Ryan, CEO, Anex.

“The community were concerned that the allocation of Australia’s national drug budget was unbalanced and reported a desire to continue to fund law enforcement but to dramatically increase prevention and harm reduction programs,” said Ryan.

The current national budget for drug prevention and response allocates 56% to law enforcement, 22% to education for prevention, 19% to treatment and only 2% to reducing the harms caused by drug use. The survey found that the community wants funding for harm reduction increased to 22% of the total budget, prevention education increased to 33% and a commensurate decrease in law enforcement related funding component to 22%.

“There was an extremely high level of contradiction within the survey responses, which shows us there are large gaps in the community’s understanding of drugs despite ongoing education and awareness campaigns,” said Ryan.

Anex found respondents’ answers were largely motivated by a fear of drugs and a need to protect themselves, their family and friends.

The survey showed 62% of respondents believed that addiction is an inevitable consequence of drug use. Yet nearly half of all respondents had tried cannabis and as many as one in five had sampled other illicit drugs, such as ecstasy, ice, or cocaine.

“For the past 12 years Australians have been exposed to a ‘war on drugs’ style rhetoric, which has had a large emphasis on law enforcement and ‘scare-tactic’ educational campaigns. But the community is looking for a more balanced approach,” said Ryan.

The community showed considerable concern around drugs and drug use. Most people (86%)

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would be worried if someone close to them was using drugs, while 85% of people regard drugs as a serious problem in our society. A further 77% think the problem is escalating.

“Statistics show one in seven Australians use an illicit drug. No one sets out to become drug dependent, yet more than 78,000 Australians are. Now more than ever we need to continue to have systems in place to protect and support the vulnerable in our society,” said Ryan.

“Rather than having a rational understanding of drugs and the effects of drugs, the general public are fearful and tend to want to put distance between themselves and the problem,”

“This distance means people are less inclined to engage in understanding the critical public health measures that are in place, such as Needle and Syringe Programs, and it cements the social marginalisation of people who are vulnerable to drug use,” said Ryan.

Less than half of respondents knew how to safely dispose of a discarded syringe with almost a quarter of people saying they would put the unprotected needle straight in the bin. Close to one in four people said they would ignore it altogether consequently leaving others in danger of needle stick injuries.

The survey also showed people have little understanding of harm reduction services, such as Australia’s world leading Needle and Syringe Program. One third of respondents believed Needle and Syringe Programs encouraged drug use. An overwhelming 20% of people thought Needle and Syringe Programs dispensed drugs and a further 40% were unsure. These programs decrease drug use and provide access to sterile equipment and referrals to treatment. They do not dispense drugs.

“These programs are in place to protect users and the wider community. Needle and Syringe Programs alone have already prevented thousands of Australians from contracting HIV and Hepatitis C resulting in savings of up to \$7 billion in avoided healthcare costs. But the future of these programs are under threat due to lack of support and community understanding,” concluded Ryan.

Australia is leading the world in harm reduction. We have one of the lowest rates of HIV infections despite having a high number of injecting drug users as acknowledged in the UN 2009 World Drug Report. The prevention of a massive HIV epidemic here was attributed to Australia’s quick response to the virus by conceiving and implementing the extremely effective Needle and Syringe Programs.

The full findings of this survey will be launched at Anex 09 Australian Drugs Conference – Drugs in Hard Times, taking place in Melbourne on 1 and 2 October 2009. For further information visit:

<http://www.australiandrugsconference.org.au/>

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***Attention Media Personnel:***

For further information or to schedule an interview with John Ryan, CEO, Anex, please contact the media team on 02 9212 3888 / 0415 401 200

Anex 09 Australian Drug Conference – Drugs in Hard Times takes place at RACV Club, 501 Bourke Street, Melbourne, on 1 – 2 October 2009. For further information, please visit:

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