

**Comment from Greg Denham, Harm Reduction Australia board member and former Victoria Police senior sergeant:**

One of the greatest impediments that people who use illicit drugs experience in trying to access health, social and welfare services is the stigma and discrimination that they carry with them in nearly all aspects of their lives. Unable and therefore unwilling to attend mainstream health services, they frequently encounter unsympathetic and in many cases openly hostile medical and health staff who have little understanding or empathy for the situation that drug users find themselves in. Many hospitals refuse to treat people who are drug dependent and experiencing severe pain or withdrawal symptoms. They are made to wait for hours to get treatment in accident and emergency departments where staff hope that they will get fed up and walk out.

Inevitably they become ostracized. The attitudes of health care workers reflects the beliefs of many in the broader community that people who use drugs, especially people that inject drugs, are all disease-riddled criminals who scam their way through life leaving a trail of destruction behind them. Yet we know from extensive research that the majority of people that use illicit drugs do not commit crime to support their drug use and haven't 'chosen' to live a life of destitution (who would?). Many are the victims of trauma, dysfunctional and abusive upbringings, have co-existing and often untreated mental health conditions, use drugs to self medicate and as an escape.

The media frequently exploits and reinforces the narrow understanding held by many in the community about people who use drugs problematically, especially street-based users. Often using an inflammatory narrative including sensational headlines (HS 'Junkie Town') the media objective is to polarize the community to gain the attention of the public by creating a moral panic. Unfortunately, this reporting does little to progress a considered and evidence-informed debate about how best to deal with the complex issue of drug dependency. It does nothing to generate confidence amongst people who use drugs that their issues will be dealt with by health services in a considered, non-judgemental and humane fashion. Furthermore, by legitimizing the stigma and discrimination that people who use drugs experience, the media reinforces the belief held by many that people who use drugs 'should be treated in a discriminatory fashion' because that 'sends a strong message' not to use drugs. This is a vicious cycle and self-fulfilling. In most cases however, it's not the drug use that is the problem, it's the continued, relentless and damning negative views held by many in the community which is exacerbated and exploited by certain sections of the media. It's society's beliefs and attitudes towards drug users that is the real issue, not the drugs.