

IOAD 2025

Thank you to Peter and Amanda, and all the good people of Yarra. I'd also like to pay my respects to the people of the Kulin Nations on who's land we meet.

As we gather today it's been 25 years of coming together and remembering those who have passed away from OD., 25 years of raising awareness about those living with injuries from non-fatal overdose, of campaigning for programs and services and education that would lower the death toll, and 25 years of having created a space for society as a whole to extend a hand-in-understanding to those who are grieving the loss of somebody from overdose.

What began here in Melbourne as an acknowledgement of the pain felt and the stigma experienced and the loss to communities faced, has become a worldwide movement, that, unfortunately, is as important today as it was on that initial day in 2001.

At that time, I had been managing the St Kilda NSP and we had of course been through a time of unprecedented numbers of fatalities in 1999 and 2000 here in Australia. I had seen and heard from so many people who had lost loved-ones. They talked of their anguish and pain, but also a sense of abandonment and isolation in regard to the right to being able to honour the people they were grieving with pride. And it occurred to me there was a need to set aside a time, one day in the calendar, to acknowledge that loss. To give people a chance to mourn without shame their partners and friends and siblings and parents. Their children and work colleagues and clients and neighbours and extended family, all those who had been lost.

I'd seen the complication of grief that arises from such deaths before. In the early 1980s, when I was a very young social worker in rural Victoria, a woman came to see me after her son, Nick, had died from overdose. She'd come to see me really because of the shame she felt, the judgements that had been made about her and her son, from the

people in the town that meant her grief was complicated. In a time of great pain, she felt a type disgrace that made grieving profoundly difficult. This included people from her own family, something I've come across often enough in the ensuing years.

Nick was in a house with 2 young people who worked tirelessly for an hour while the one ambulance in the town was attending a car accident. Those two young people were also affected by the occurrence. They left town, and one of them has also now passed away.

All of it stayed with me. I never forgot the effect that the stigma of losing Nick in this way, had on his mother. The ignorance people demonstrated, perhaps not entirely their own fault, given overdose, like drug use, was a taboo subject and so misunderstood. Something that should have changed by now but sadly, in general terms, hasn't.

When I came to Melbourne in the 1990s and worked for the Children's Hospital in mental health, I met parents and carers of young people who were using and quickly realised the lack of support they were receiving, sometimes experiencing not only shame but much misappropriated blame, for their child's interaction with drugs.

Of course, when I joined the Harm Reduction team in St Kilda in 1998, my understanding became ten-fold. I saw how the damage Overdose wrought reverberated in the using community. Some people I met had lost up to 17 friends. Many had lost partners and a good proportion of them had been excluded from attending the funeral of their loved-one.

To me the pain seemed so profound, it could have been considered a risk factor in-and-of-itself. I also thought that the general population had matured sufficiently to offer a hand of understanding to this community and further. And so, when Peter Streker, approached me from the City of PP early in 2 thousand and 1, to see if I had an idea

for spending 1500 dollars, I told him I wanted to start a day, called Overdose Day. Someone else argued that their idea was better and the money was split and with 750 dollars, he and I went and bought silver ribbon and pins, and we handed out over 6,000 of them that very first year.

On the day, we held a gathering in the backyard of the CC in St Kilda. Joan Nicholas told the story of her adult son, an ecologist who moved to central Australia, in an effort to stop using. And, even in remote Australia, he scored and died within 6 weeks. The mayor of PP spoke along with Sarah Lord from HR Vic. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Of course, Overdose day was always going to be political.

It was a day of confronting the barriers we had in front of us as we worked to lower the toll of these by-and-large preventable deaths.

This takes me back to the mid-2000s when Steve Bracks and John Thwaites from the Victorian Labor Party were planning to opening five injecting rooms across the Melbourne metropolitan area and walked back from it, despite the good evidence, when an election was called.

We got our wonderful primary health care facilities instead, but it is my view, along with others, that we could have all had smaller discrete facilities attached to those premises for not a lot extra cost which would have changed the current landscape significantly. Certainly, it would have made a difference in St Kilda where we have outdoor, unsupervised injecting spaces all over the suburb.

Of course, along with the many losses, including the stubbornness of the legislators to decriminalise drug use and the set-backs of the Howard years: (I call those years the lost years, and feel that they still stand over us in regard to educating GPs and the medical fraternity in general, not to mention the general public about the properties of

drugs and the similarities of licit and illicit drugs, both with the same potential to cause overdose given they are, in essence, the same drugs) Still, along with the losses, we have had wins. The injecting room in Richmond, a shining example.

And I can't go on without mentioning Naloxone. It has been, literally, a game changer, a life saver.

But it was a long fight. Barriers that turned out to be non-existent had, purely because of attitudes of discrimination, held us up for years. The drug, Naloxone had been around since 1972, when it was developed in Japanese labs. And from 1990, the Italian government had scheduled Naloxone so it could be given out over the counter in pharmacies.

It was 30 years later in 2010 that a woman from the States came to speak at a conference in Melbourne, held by the Penington Institute. She told us that they in the states, weren't waiting for the all-okay. They knew how stable a drug Naloxone was. And, in the case of Italy, who had a high number of people using opiates, and a great need for Naloxone, there had never been one case of a bad or incorrect reaction to the drug. No one had or has, in fact, ever sued the health system or manufacturers in Italy or beyond. So, those HR workers in the States weren't waiting any longer. Proceeding under the banner: A dead drug user can't recover, they were simply doing what they knew to be the right thing.

But even this didn't quite make it past our conservative, reserved Australian brains. And it wasn't until approximately a year later when, at the Burnet Institute, three women researchers came to speak about a pilot program in a prison in Canberra, that we suddenly had our eyes opened.

Barriers! They said to all of us. Do not exist. Basically, there are none. And, we urge you, all of you, to simply begin.

My boss, Bec Thatcher, and I met at the front of the building with Jane Dicka from HR Vic and we hatched a plan. There were a few who wanted us to be cautious and wait for a considered roll out. But for us, the time had come. And, Access Health with HR Vic's help, became the first place to disseminate Naloxone in Vic.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that this work has always been a collective matter. Small forward steps made on the backs of so many wonderful people across the country that have such amazing knowledge. Peter Werner, here today and there at the beginning. And now the sector of Harm Reduction is deep and vast. Well versed, if not a little jaded sometimes.

There's nothing like a Coroner's report, declaring a ten year high for our local Overdose Rate, to sober the most hopeful.

Note on Coroner's report.???

So, what do I think will help? I'd like to see recommendations implemented without being cherry picked or down graded or having their edges knocked off them. I'd like funds redirected from law enforcement and legal responses and put into publicly funded treatment centres, each offering different things to suit different needs. Programs that are open and expansive and modern.

I dream of the day when drug testing kits are widely available, and HR exists in our regional areas in a more robust manner.

The coroner's report points out that someone is dying every 15 hours, the rate far higher than the motor accident death toll, so it's difficult to understand why more meaningful responses are not being implemented, including regulation of all substances, as opposed to prohibition.

The second year, we held OD day, down on the pier.

Chris's story is from long ago now, but it's a current tale given so little has changed, especially for those using alone. If there was no stigma

attached, no legal ramifications to bear, he may well have been able to ask a colleague to look in on him.

Which brings us full circle.

Back to why on August 31st, communities all over the world, gather together to raise our voices as one, so that a light might be shone on overdose. And with that one loud voice we can gather our solidarity to say what we know to be true: that, by and large, these deaths are preventable. And that we would like as a society to extend a hand, cast a protective net over all of us: all our children and parents and friends and partners.

I want to finish by saying Overdose Awareness Day stands up for the right of everyone to have control over their physicality. It's a day that aims to cast off the burden of secrets and to relinquish guilt. It is a day to celebrate life and the joy that all of us bring. It is a day that recognises, no matter how the path of life was followed, a person should never be diminished. And it is a day for the community to acknowledge that overdose is a cause of death and injury that for many, means the loss of someone who can never be replaced.

Thank you.