



MEDIA RELEASE

SYDNEY CONFERENCE ATTRACTS DRUG TREATMENT SERVICES FROM AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

This week marks an important event for people working in the Alcohol and other Drugs (AOD) field with the 34th Australasian Therapeutic Communities Association (ATCA) conference being held in Sydney, at the Mercure Hotel, Sydney, over two days – Wednesday 1 and Thursday 2 November.

Mr Gerard Byrne, Chair of ATCA, said today, “We are excited to once again be able to host this important international conference after some years absence due to the Covid pandemic.

We have delegates arriving from across Australia and New Zealand to take part in a conference that will truly meet the conference themes of *Inclusion, Innovation, Impact and Sustainability.*”

Membership of ATCA stretches across Australia and New Zealand, with services in residential and non-residential settings, in communities and prisons, withdrawal management, for adults, young people and families with children. ATCA members provide residential services in more than 60 settings, together with a range of non-residential services. Tens of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders receive services from ATCA member organisations each year.

Mr Byrne acknowledged the support ATCA members in Australia receive from the Australian Government, through the Department of Health and Aged Care and state and territory Departments of Health, but added that more funding was needed to meet the rehabilitation and treatment needs of this vulnerable population and to support families whose lives are affected by substance misuse and co-occurring mental health concerns.

Melanie Walker, Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Alcohol and other Drugs Council, who will be speaking at the conference on Thursday, said today, “We know that while around 200,000 people receive AOD treatment each year in Australia, up to another 500,000 people are missing out due to a current lack of funding and capacity in the sector. In order to save lives, governments need to ensure that people who need AOD treatment are able to access it. It’s also important that a range of evidence-based treatment and harm reduction services are available to people – both in the community and in custodial settings – if we are to prevent deaths and improve health outcomes for individuals, families and communities.”

Professor Peter Kelly, from the University of Wollongong, will be speaking at the conference on the outcomes of years of research with therapeutic communities in Australia and internationally.

“Our work has helped to demonstrate that people attending therapeutic communities have a positive experience and are highly satisfied with treatment,” he stated today.

Professor Kelly has also focused his research on the value of Lived and Living Experience workers, and this is a theme that will be taken up during the conference through workshop and presentations.

“Participants across our studies consistently spoke about the value and importance of staff member’s own lived experience with recovery.”

Associate Professor Sally Nathan from the University of New South Wales will focus her attention during the conference on young people.

“Many studies show that young people with problematic drug use often experience cumulative disadvantages across multiple life domains, including poverty, trauma, interrupted schooling, unstable living arrangements, mental illness and disability. Programs to address young peoples’ complex intersecting issues, including building their life skills and community connections, can have a major impact.”

The Youth Pathways study provides evidence to support the role of therapeutic community programs for young people, including improving mental health, reducing suicides and self-harm, as well as hospitalisations, and a reduction in criminal convictions if young people stay 30 days or more in the program.

The conference program includes more than 50 speakers, with Judge Jane Mottley from the NSW Drug Court and Judge Warwick Hunt from the Walama List both speaking on the value of diversion to treatment from the criminal justice system to therapeutic community treatment settings. Other speakers will bring evidence and reports from a range of custodial settings, including the Solaris Program in ACT’s Alexander Maconochie Centre, the Wandoo Prison in Perth and the Alternative to Custody Program in Alice Springs.

Mr Byrne noted the discussion on reducing recidivism was a key session during the conference, with other sessions looking at the needs of families, the inclusion of vulnerable populations into treatment and the tremendous success that can result for those undertaking therapeutic community treatment.

“Therapeutic Communities have been part of the Australian treatment landscape for more than 50 years. We know they work, and we are delighted that during the coming week we will have the chance once again to meet and discuss the way forward based on years of successful practice and research evidence.”

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