**Drug Education: An Effective undertaking for schools**

**An Interview with Professor Steve Allsop**

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| Jason Shortal | Hello, I welcome this opportunity to introduce Professor Steve Allsop to you. Professor Allsop is Acting Director of Practice Development at the Western Australian Drug and Alcohol Office and Associate Professor in International Health at Curtin University of Technology Western Australia. He’s worked extensively in education and research in the field of drugs. He joins me now to discuss the issues surrounding drug education in our schools.Welcome Steve Allsop. |
| Steve Allsop | Hello |
| Jason Shortal | Is drug use an issue for young people? |
| Steve Allsop | It is in a number of ways. We live, all of us, young people, adults in a drug taking world. A Large proportion of the population drink alcohol, a substantial proportion smoke, illegal drugs, prescribed drugs, over the counter drugs. So I think the first point is young people live in a world in which drugs are used quite widely, But I think we’ve also got to recognise whilst we need to be concerned to equip young people to live in that world we also have to recognise that the majority of young people actually don’t use drugs in a hazardous way or harmful way. But we also have to recognise that some do and it’s important that we equip young people to live in a world which is full of opportunity but also has some threats. |
| Jason Shortal | Well what does the research tell us about young people and drugs? |
| Steve Allsop | It essentially tells us that the majority of young people don’t use drugs hazardously. But some do, do get into difficulty. There’s quite extensive research being done overseas and in Australia which tells us a number of things. It tells us that young people who get into difficulty with drugs, serious difficulty with drugs. Drug use is often part of a whole range of difficulties. You often find that they’re not well connected to the school system, they’re not well connected to the community and have very, feel as though they’ve got very little support from adults. That’s not to say that everyone who gets difficulty with drugs has those problems, but if those circumstances exist the risk of drug use is much higher. So an important message for us is if we want to protect young people from harm from drugs and in fact from a number of other issues we need to find ways in which we can connect young people to schools, so that they feel competent and confident within the school system. We need to help young people feel connected to adults, particularly to parents or to other important adults in their life, and we need to help young people have a connectedness to communities, to recreation, to each other and to other adults in their environment. So it’s very important that we recognise It’s not just a case of providing one or two hours of information about the risks of drug use. It’s about a whole of community, whole of school approach to engage people and to feel comfortable and confident in their environment in which they live. |
| Jason Shortal | Ok, well taking that broader view of things, the whole school, the whole community, what do you see as being the implications for schools then. |
| Steve Allsop | I think schools have an important, a very important role to play in helping young people avoid harmful drug use. But we also should recognise that they are not the only important players. We can’t expect fantastic objectives of the school system. We have to recognise that schools have a role to play, but so do the politicians so do parents, and so does the media, so does the broad community. But within that broad community context of providing a safe environment in which young people can grow and develop we also recognise that schools have a very important role to engage people in the school system and also to provide information so that young people can live safely in a drug using world. |
| Jason Shortal | What is “The drug problem” for young people? |
| Steve Allsop | The answer to that is there is no single drug problem. I think one of the mythologists that exist is that, “the drug problem”. In fact there is a whole range of different drug problems. Some problems can arise in relation to the acute or the short term effects of drug use. Intoxication. If we use alcohol as an example. Anyone who drinks might experience problems of intoxication. Drunkenness, violence, drink driving, accidents, other trauma, problems at home. So one of the concerns is in relation to the harms that can arise from the short term effects of drug use. But there is also harms that can arise in terms of regular use of drugs, the regular drip, drip, drip, for example alcohol into our system. If somebody has several drinks each day, they might not get intoxicated, but if they drink in that way every day they might experience health concerns from that sort of continued exposure. There are sometimes people who become dependent on drugs and people can experience harms in the area of dependence. But you don’t need to be dependent to experience problems of intoxication. You don’t need to get drunk to experience problems of regular use. So we need to recognise that different patterns of drug use can result in different sorts or harms and those different sorts of harms require quite specific responses. What we do to prevent drink driving is quite different from what we might do to prevent cirrhosis.What we do to prevent cirrhosis might be quite different from what we might do to prevent drug overdose. What we do to prevent drug overdose might be quite different from what we do to prevent infectious diseases. So there is no single drug problem, there’s a whole range of drug problems. Some drug problems arise from a persons own use. But a young person can also be exposed to drug problems that can arise from another persons drug use. It might be about getting in a car with someone who is intoxicated. It might be a friend’s intoxication; it might be parent’s drug use. So we need to be very specific in identifying the risks and the harms that can arise and have quite specific responses to meet those harms. |
| Jason Shortal | So what would you say are the implications for drug education of these quite complex set of scenarios that you’re giving us. |
| Steve Allsop | I think the first thing is to recognise the complexity of drug use and drug related harm and recognise that drug education fits within a context of a range of responses. We need to provide information to people so they can make informed decisions. And recognise that sometimes those informed decisions we might be uncomfortable with what people decide to do. We need to also equip people with skills to manage and strategies to manage the complex situations and the variety of situations which they might find themselves in. The other important thing for me is that drug education needs to target those drugs of most concern and most harm and for young people, despite the headlines that might alert us to the risks of illegal drugs. At the end of the day most of the use and most of the harms arise in relation to our legal drugs, such as alcohol and tobacco. And in terms of the illegal drugs, there is much higher prevalence of cannabis. So what that tells us is we need to target the legal drugs alcohol and tobacco. We need to target prescribed drug use and over the counter medication such as cough medicines or painkillers. We need to recognise that prevalence of illegal drug use, things like amphetamines and heroin is relatively low so we need to target the drugs that cause the most harm. We need to provide good information. We need to help people make decisions.We need to help people have skills to deal with particular situations and we need to see drug education within the context of whole of community approaches. |
| Jason Shortal | Well what’s the most effective way for schools to deal with this? |
| Steve Allsop | I think there are several things. The first thing that stands out for me is, in relation to drug education is who’s the most important person to deliver drug education and for me the most important person, the most skilled person is actually, within the school system that is, is, is are teachers. Teaches are trained to work with young people, to educate young people, to teach young people. And whilst in the past a lot of people have turned to external expertise. In fact the evidence tells us the best people to deliver education are school teachers. We need to equip school teaches with the skills where they are needed, with information where that’s needed and with resources to back up their rule. If we bring in external expertise it should be for specific things, for example we might bring in the police for information about the law, but essentially the best people to deliver drug education are teaches. The other thing is that we need to recognise is that drug education needs to be part of whole of health approach. It’s not something that you can teach for one hour and then drug education is done. The most effective approach drug education is being taught within a health context, within a health curriculum and is intense and continues over a period of time. We need to recognise that drug education needs to be delivered throughout a young person’s career, but we need to match it to the challenges they might face, the learning challenges. In the early stages of a young persons career it might be simply providing information, but as they begin to face developmental and learning challenges and challenges in the real world it’s about matching that so providing intervention before behaviours are well established. There’s no use in teaching people about how to resist smoking when they are 18 years old for example when most young people might have been exposed to smoking. It’s about having a variety of messages. The best way to prevent harm from drug use is to prevent people using some of these drugs but we’ve got to recognise that despite our best approaches some people will. So teaching them how to get back on track and teaching them how to access help when it’s needed. Teaching them how to reduce harms that could arise if they don’t have the information, for example best way to avoid harm from cannabis is not to use cannabis. But it’s also important to know how to avoid getting into a car with your friend who might be intoxicated on cannabis It might also be about knowing if you ignore the advice about not using cannabis you know where to get help if you get into difficulty. So it’s having a variety of different interventions that enable a young person to meet the variety of challenges they might face. It’s about attending to the needs of the whole community the school community, teachers, pupil’s, parents needs. How do you engage the community? How do you equip the health services that might support school children whether that be school support services or external services. How do they manage young people? If connectedness to school is one of the most important things to protect a young person from harm, how does the school deal with the tension of keeping a young person at risk in the school system and managing the challenges that the young person might put to the school. So what do you do if you know someone has been using drugs? Some school’s reaction is to expel the child and I can understand the emotions and the reasoning’s that might attend that decision, but we’ve also got to recognise that by doing that we’re actually increasing the risks for that person and all the people that come into contact with that person. So equip teachers, provide resources, have an intense program that’s part of the health curriculum that goes throughout that young person’s education K-12. Is tailored to meet the various challenges that the person is exposed to. Is tailored to occur at appropriate times in the young persons life and uses not just didactic information giving but equips people with skills and strategies and also attends to the needs of other groups like the parents themselves. |
| Jason Shortal | Well certainly you’ve thrown down the challenge for our education system and our teachers. Professor Steve Allsop thank you for your time. |
| Steve Allsop | Thank you. |