

MEDIA RELEASE

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INTERNATIONAL OVERDOSE AWARENESS DAY: CALLS FOR GREATER FOCUS ON PREVENTION & HARM REDUCTION

The Australian Injecting and Illicit Drug Users League (AIVL) is calling for a greater focus on key prevention and harm reduction initiatives on International Overdose Awareness Day today. In particular, AIVL is calling for the implementation of widespread peer distribution of the opioid overdose reversal drug naloxone and enhanced resourcing for peer-based overdose prevention programs across the country.

“The National Drug Strategy refers specifically to the need to prevent and respond to overdose ‘including increased access to naloxone’¹. On International Overdose Awareness Day, the focus is on those initiatives that prevent overdoses and save lives. In the context of rising rates of overdose across the country, there really needs to be an enhanced focus on the implementation of evidence-based prevention and harm reduction measures,” said Melanie Walker, Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of AIVL.

Australia’s Annual Overdose Report 2020, released today by the Penington Institute², reveals that for the fifth year running, more than 2,000 Australians lost their lives to overdose in a single calendar year in 2018. Most of these deaths were accidental. This new report reinforces previous research by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, showing that heroin is now once again the leading opioid underlying opioid-induced accidental deaths. There have also been increases in deaths involving synthetic opioids (e.g., fentanyl, tramadol) over the past decade. An increasing rate of deaths involving psychotropic medicines (e.g., benzodiazepines, antipsychotics) and non-opioid medicines used for treatment of certain pain conditions (e.g., pregabalin) is of concern. It is important to note that these medicines are often identified alongside other drugs (e.g., cases where opioids are the underlying cause of death and benzodiazepines are an associated cause of death)³.

“Each year the national road toll is consistently exceeded by the number of Australians losing their lives to accidental drug overdose⁴. International Overdose Awareness Day is a global event held on the 31st of August each year, aiming to raise awareness of overdose and reduce the stigma of drug-related deaths. It acknowledges the grief felt by families and friends remembering those who have met with death or permanent injury as a result of drug overdose. As part of International Overdose Awareness Day, AIVL’s member organisations around the country will be undertaking activities to promote awareness and prevention and remember those lost.

“A key message is that the tragedy of overdose deaths is preventable. In this context, it’s important to focus on practical things that can be done right now in Australia to save lives. People who use drugs have an important role to play as part of broader prevention and harm reduction efforts. Enabling greater access to naloxone and peer-based overdose prevention programs are practical ways that governments can help people to protect themselves and prevent overdose deaths - which would be a wonderful outcome for individuals, families and the broader Australian community,” said Ms Walker.

AIVL is the national organisation representing people who use/have used illicit drugs and is the peak body for the state and territory peer-based drug user organisations.

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¹ National Drug Strategy 2017-2026: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/national-drug-strategy-2017-2026>

² Australia’s Annual Overdose Report 2020: <https://www.penington.org.au/publications/2020-overdose-report/>

³ National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre: <https://ndarc.med.unsw.edu.au/resource/trends-drug-induced-deaths-australia-1997-2018>

⁴ Australian Government Road Safety Statistics: <https://www.roadsafety.gov.au/performance/road-deaths-road-user>