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## More Help Needed for Substance Abuse Kids

Kids Helpline General Manager, Wendy Protheroe said today that more specialist help services are needed to address substance abuse by young Australians.

Ms Protheroe said she was not surprised that the Australian National Council on Drugs' report released yesterday showed that children and teenagers were either experimenting with drugs and alcohol or were exposed to its abuse on a daily basis.

"In the six-year period from 2001-2006, there were 2,180 counselling contacts with Kids Helpline where the primary concern had to do with alcohol while a further 10,299 contacts were about other drug use," Ms Protheroe said.

There was evidence of excessive alcohol use in 42 per cent of all counselling contacts with the service. In at least one third of those cases, counsellors were sufficiently concerned about alcohol dependence to refer the young person for treatment.

In addition, more than 40 per cent of those who were 15 years of age or older reported they were frequent drug users with about 4 per cent necessitating urgent intervention or treatment referral.

According to Ms Protheroe, more than half of the young people contacting Kids Helpline with alcohol or drug concerns were repeat users of the service or were ongoing counselling or case managed clients.

"Many young people know they need help and they can get it by calling us. Unfortunately, although we operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week, we can only take so many calls with thousands of kids missing out.

"In 2006 more than 600,000 young people tried to contact our counsellors, but due to resourcing issues we could only talk to about half of those who called."

Ms Protheroe said that if governments and the wider community are serious about helping young people reverse destructive behaviour like alcohol and drug abuse, they need to put significant resources into helping more kids access the help they need. This includes tapping into their preferred communications networks.

"Young people are turning to new technologies for help seeking in preference to face-to-face and phone counselling, for example, synchronous chat, blogs, wikis, sms and facebook, just to name a few. Kids Helpline recognises we need to use these technologies to reach young people and offers an online counselling service, however, this is limited and new services are hard to create due to the high costs involved," she said.

Ms Protheroe said that the social cost to the Australian community if the substance abuse trend was not addressed was enormous, with the cost far more than just financial.

"The health, crime and road accident costs associated with illicit drug use have been estimated at approximately \$11.7 billion, but that is nothing when compared to the cost of losing Australia's future<sup>1</sup>.

"Clearly, if we are to ensure Australia remains prosperous and on track, we need to create a forward and healthy future for Australian youth."

Kids Helpline is Australia's only free 24 hour, seven day a week counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years of age.

ENDS

<sup>1</sup>T. Moore (2007) *Working estimates of the social costs per gram and per user for cannabis, cocaine, opiates and amphetamines*. DPMP Monograph No. 14.

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