

**THE NIGHT VENUES AND ENTERTAINMENT EVENTS PROJECT:  
CREATING SAFER ENVIRONMENTS FOR PATRONS AND INDUSTRY  
THROUGH POLICY, PARTNERSHIP, ENVIRONMENT CHANGE AND  
EDUCATION**

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I am here to give a brief overview of the Night Venues project, which is a policy initiative of the Drug and Alcohol Office in Perth, Western Australia. Just to give you a little introduction to the policy: it is a statewide policy initiative with the primary aim of reducing drug related harm in night venues. When we say night venues, we are primarily referring to 'nightclubs', however, it also does apply to other types of events such as one-off dance parties, rock concerts, music festivals and so forth, but certainly the key focus is the nightclub environment. The project is based on two principles that are quite important to the Drug and Alcohol Office in Perth - one is that of an inclusive approach involving all the key stakeholders in the area, and the other is their commitment to evidence based policy.

The project is led by the Drug and Alcohol Office, which is the Perth State Government Health Organisation, which manages most aspects of health interventions around drugs in Perth. The theoretical and research base behind it is largely drawn from the National Drug Research Institute's soon-to-be-published monograph '*The prevention of substance use, risk and harm in Australia – a review of the evidence*', and the focus of that document is largely on systemic reform and systemic environmental change. We also owe a debt of gratitude to the *Safer Clubbing Guidelines* from the UK, which have already been referred to; and quite importantly, in terms of the practicalities of getting this up and running, the whole project has been designed with the support of the local Liquor Licensing authority, simply called Liquor Licensing, which is a body with quite significant power for the nightlife industry in Western Australia (WA).

Now the focus of the whole policy is on modifying the nightclub environment and context in order to reduce the risk of drug related harm. We have involved quite a diverse range of stakeholders, with often-contradictory agendas and institutional opinions at times. It was led by the Drug and Alcohol Office, and we also had senior representatives from the WA police service, the Department Of Health, the National Drugs Research Institute (which is where I come in), the Liquor Licensing Directorate, the Cabaret Owners Association (which is the nightclubs owners industry Group), and the Australian Hotels Association.

Our Policy statement is something of a mission statement for the group. The final version, after much negotiation between the differing stakeholders, was: "*We do not support, promote or condone the use of illegal drugs; we are committed to preventing drug use and harms associated with use through a prevention and education approach*".

Just a brief overview of the policy itself: there are four main aspects of the strategy; one is the *Industry Code of Practice*; the next is the *Venue Support Package* that the Drug and Alcohol Office offers to the industry; then a patron education component; and a component of assessment and evaluation. I am going to go through each of these items in turn.

To start with the *Industry Code of Practice*: the code of practice is published by the Drug and Alcohol Office, it provides a list of specific harm reduction strategies which night venues are encouraged to implement, and they are expected to develop a specific policy to reduce drug related harm. The code of practice is supported by Liquor Licensing, and we are quite lucky in that regard in that in Western Australia legislation mandates that Liquor Licensing's primary role is to act to reduce harm in licensed premises, so we came into it with the advantage they already have the power to enforce harm reduction initiatives in night venues.

Some of the details from the codes of practice: all venues are encouraged to implement all of the following policies. So this includes providing adequate and accessible water at a reasonable price - we would of liked that to have been free water but the industry objected; they are asked to ensure adequate ventilation in venues, to do their best to prevent overcrowding, to provide a 'chill out' room at larger venues as appropriate; to do their best to encourage safe transport is available for journeys home after events - we recognise that is not always within the venues power, but they are expected to make an effort; they are asked to provide at least one first aid trained member on the premises, and also to keep an incident register to outline drug related problems and how they were dealt with.

There is also a list of more optional polices, which venues are encouraged to implement as appropriate according to their circumstances. This includes keeping patrons educated on the nature of drug related harm in the venue; supporting key staff to attend relevant training; providing information to patrons about their rights and responsibilities; supporting relevant public education campaigns, and their support strategies for venues - so by that we mean, for example, if in the future Perth developed a problem with GHB or Ketamine, which it does not presently have, the venues would be asked to support that as appropriate. There is recognition that peer support might be appropriate in some venues, and again staff are asked to be supportive in terms of responsible service of alcohol training.

The significance of this document is essentially the change in philosophy and the environment in WA. Venues are now expected to acknowledge the reality of drug use and develop an appropriate harm reduction strategy based upon that. In the past they had no incentive, no obligation to respond to drug related harm, and the laws were as such that, if they even acknowledge the presence of a illicit drug on their venue then they risked losing their liquor licence; so it is quite a dramatic shift in approach for Perth.

So the code of practice has been developed through this collaborative process, and it is strongly supported by both the nightclub industry and the hotel industry. As well as that support, it is also backed up by Liquor Licensing in that if a specific venue is in breech of the code of practice or has a specific problem with drug related harm, then

Liquor Licensing has the power to require specific strategies to be implemented or that venue risks losing their liquor licence.

I would like to move on to now to the venue support package. Drug and Alcohol Office offers quite a comprehensive support package including three main aspects; there is training on drug education for staff, training on house policy development for managers and owners, and training on risk management strategies, again for owners and managers. The basic staff-training package includes the following; information on the drug, person and environment interaction, with a focus on the impact of the environment on moderating drug risk. There is what I guess you would call basic drug education on the features of the main illicit drugs that are used, the key areas of harm related to them and appropriate responses to those types of harm.

When it comes to the house policy development, venue managers are expected to develop a house policy statement and we certainly make a big effort to provide them with support in doing that. Drug and Alcohol Office assists them in developing the statement or policy; the policy is meant to define the venue's commitment to reducing drug related harm. They are meant to identify specific issues in relevance to that premise, and then we take them through the process in developing that in detail.

The risk management strategies are a key component of this. Operators and management are provided with quite a substantial training package on ways they can reduce risk in their premises. We start with an overview of the advantages of a risk management approach for a club owner or manager, which focuses on reducing the potential legal liability, improving compliance with Liquor Licensing requirements, and improving the safety of venue patrons. So within that risk management strategy, the management are taught basic risk management framework of establishing the context, identifying the risks, analysing those risks and developing a strategy that will respond to those risks; we go through the main areas of drug related risks, such as problems of intoxication, of overdose, of overheating, dehydration and so forth, just to make sure that management is thinking the same way as us about what the key areas of risk actually are.

We also go through the process of actually developing and implementing this management strategy in detail. This particular part of the program was inspired by the nightclub industry itself, saying they would like assistance in the details of how to go about implementing these policies. So we go through identifying the available resources for implementing their risk management strategy, specifying who is going to be involved, identifying the key areas in that organisation, identifying which organisations might be appropriate to consult with on that strategy, and how staff and patrons are going to be informed about this. Now the Drug and Alcohol Office provides ongoing support with this to the venues, they are available on a consultative basis as needed, and will provide training and education to assist with implementing strategies as required. This means that the Office is going to be quite happy to develop training packages if there is a need for them and none exists. The rationale for that is essentially that we recognise there may be rapid changes in venue needs in types of drug related risks, and we will change the training and education as needed in accordance with that.

I am going to briefly skip through the patron education component, this is what you would call the fairly traditionally drug education; so a variety of posters and pamphlets about the relative risks and harms of key drugs and means of reducing those risks – it is not a big part of the strategy. When it comes to assessment and evaluation, we are trying to assess both the process and the implementation of that strategy, and the outcomes of it - which is the extent of drug related harm. So the two main means used to do that are an observational audit and a patron survey.

With the observational audit, research staff were hired to go anonymously into venues, acting as if they were patrons and punters and then rate the venue on a number of characteristics, including display of their drug policies and issues like overcrowding, temperature, ventilation and obvious signs of drug related harm. We are taking baseline measures at present and we are going to repeat this in 2006 to see what the levels of change are.

The other area of the assessment is the patron survey which is a questionnaire conducted by the street press in Western Australia. The main assessment areas are attendance of venues - identifying which areas and which venues people attend, looking at those experiences at specific venues. We are particularly interested in the frequency at which patrons both experience drug related harm themselves and witnessed other people experiencing drug related harm. We also look at customer support for all the specific policies that I spoke about earlier under the industry code of practice.

So just the initial results, very briefly, the observational audit – we did have some problems administering that - it was essentially taken at some of the wrong times, when the venues were nearly empty, so the results did not mean very much. But the tests that were valid came out that there were certainly issues with overcrowding, overheating and ventilation in Perth premises, and we are currently redoing that to make up for the errors in the first round of data collection.

With the patron survey, the results showed that we had very strong support for all the proposed policies that we wanted to implement, with the exception of the drug education component – it was still supported by the majority, but the support was much less. In terms of frequency of drug related harm, most people were quite ready to notice that they had frequently seen others experiencing drug related harm in the nightlife context, but did not really identify themselves as having experienced any harm, and I think that is a finding that mirrors other studies in the drug use literature - that people are quite ready to recognise harm in others, but do not see the same issue as a harm in themselves.

So where to next? It is a three-year project, and is also being conducted under an action research model. We are intending to adapt and modify it over time in light of the feedback from stakeholders; and if there are any developments, policies or harm reduction strategies that seem effective in nightclub settings from the evidence base we include them. Hopefully by the end of this conference I will have a few more ideas about what we might want to include.

Thank you very much.

