

*On 22 July 2013, to commemorate **International Remembrance Day**, a tree was dedicated in Lawrence Hardgrave Park, King's Cross as a memorial to the many people who used illicit drugs who have died from drug related deaths, be it from overdose, blood borne viruses or other health problems. Many people attended and spoke including family members, those who work with people who use drugs and politicians. The very moving contribution was a speech given by Sione, who identified with a history of drug use and spoke on behalf of the drug using community at the ceremony.*

I am honoured to represent to people who inject drugs at this memorial. I felt a heavy weight whenever I thought about what I wanted to say today. This issue is intensely personal for me and, I think, for every drug user. I have lost a number of friends over the years including two of my closest friends, Chris and Micky. Chris died on my birthday and it is now a day I now dread. While I don't need a tree to remind me about Chris or Leah or Micky or Jarryd or Tom and the others I have lost I am glad that we now have a memorial, in a public space, a symbol that says their lives and the lives of all the other people who have died from drug related causes, were and are valued.

What is shameful is that in life we are, too often, not valued.

While overdose is the cause of death for far too many, I believe, the war on drugs is responsible for many more. Drug users are still vilified in the media – just the other night a current affairs program stooped to its usual low and further stigmatised an already despised group – those on methadone or Buprenorphine treatment. These TV shows makes it clear that even if you go looking for assistance with drug issues you are still going to be looked down upon as a criminal rather than someone looking for health care it isn't surprising that drug users do not seek healthcare except in extreme circumstances.

My friend Micky was complaining of "gut troubles" for a year before seeing a doctor. By that point it was way too late and he died from bowel cancer within months. He didn't see doctors for a range of complex reasons but they included an absolute mistrust of a set of people that had let him down continually around his drug use issues and accused him of drug seeking when he did complain about his health.

Although Micky did not die of an overdose and it is not likely he would have survived even had he sought treatment earlier, his experiences of discrimination around his drug use undoubtedly meant that he never had any chance of beating cancer.

I could tell a number of stories to illustrate this point, but I chose Micky simply because he had spent much of his life trying to fight this stigma and discrimination and I know he would be happy for me to tell his story this way.

Until now a focus for these remembrance days has often been overdose. Over Dose is serious and often preventable. It is horrific in that it is often sudden, preventable and strikes those who we think it won't. But it is just one way to die amongst many. Heart issues plague people who have injected, as does hepatitis C, and associated liver problems, along with the lesser risk but ever-present HIV. Stimulant users face issues which are even less well known than those facing opioid users. Issues do not stop at the physical. Often needless isolation from family, friends and mainstream society in

general is the lot of the drug user. Many users try for years but can never do enough to make amends to their friends and family.

The police and prison are a very real and constant threat for all users and quite apart from the appalling health care that drug users receive in prison, opportunities to make it in the mainstream dry up after a stint inside.

There are many, many, ways for us to die and while overdose is important it is also easy to visualise and understand. These other health and social issues are difficult to quantify and to act upon and to speak about. But there needs to be a change in the way we as a society see and think about drug use if we are to stop people needlessly dying. What is crucial is that people who use drugs should be part of the solution. We understand the dynamics I have just spoken about, we care about our peers, which is more than can be said for most people.

While I am, as I said, really glad that a public memorial has been placed here to honour my friends and all the others who have died from overdose and drug related health issues, I want to call on each and every one of you – especially those who wield power – to think also of those who still live every day with drug issues and whose lives are undervalued by just about everyone. I ask you to think about solutions that are not as simple as “stop using drugs” because that is not working and never will work. I ask you to think but also to act to save and champion those few services and organisations –like NUAA, AIVL, MSIC and KRC – who treat users as humans and who value us beyond our drug use. I ask you to work in partnership with people who use drugs. Most of all I ask all of us when we see or think of this memorial to honour the lives of those still living and battling as well as those for whom our actions are too late by actually changing the way we talk and act on drug use issues.

I just want to say finally, because I have the floor that I miss you Chris and Micky and Jarryd.