



Newtown Neighbourhood Centre Incorporated

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24th December 2004

Dear Dr Refshauge,

Re: Drug & Alcohol Counselling Program at Newtown Neighbourhood Centre

We write in response to the letter from Cherie Burton, Parliamentary Secretary for Health, that was forwarded to us by your office on 15th November 2004.

It is news to us that any review has taken place, or indeed been completed, but this lack of communication is not surprising considering we have not at any stage been informed or consulted about this review.

We do not have access to information about how the review was done or to any statistics the Department of Health may have compiled. Our response is based on the direct experience of our front office staff, who managed bookings for the counsellor. They continue to see former clients and potential new clients on a regular basis.

The letter states that attendance at the centre was too low for it to be considered viable. We want to know how that view was arrived at. Were other factors involved in the decision?

The Counsellor was usually booked up for at least three weeks in advance. The stated attendance rates of an 'average 2 to 3 people per week' really means per day, because the counsellor was only available one day per week. (thursdays) This rate actually constitutes almost 100 % of the total of bookings available. New clients were booked in the morning (3 bookings between 9.30 and 12.30) by NNC staff or via telephone referrals . In the afternoons the counsellor booked and managed her regular and ongoing clients (anywhere between 1 and 3 clients from 1 – 4pm)

An attendance rate of 2-3 clients per day from a maximum of 6 available bookings totals almost 50%.

Given the itinerant lifestyles of many of our clients, and the characteristic inability of many people with a substance dependence to follow through appointments made well in advance, we consider this attendance rate represents a very significant demand.

Benefits of having a counsellor here include:

- the maintenance of a strong link between health and community services that together provided very useful information,
- support and advice to a range of individuals and also to other community services.

In addition to one-to-one advice, the counsellor ran a cannabis reduction program and a pilot program on controlled drinking. Both programs were well attended. Were these facts included in the review? How do these figures compare with free drug and alcohol counselling involving a similar demographic in a hospital setting?

The letter also states that demand is “not large enough” to provide a counselling service in Newtown. As our local member you must be aware of how bizarre that statement appears. Our direct experience is that Newtown has a large population of drug and alcohol users, and this has a significant impact on the community as a whole. You only need to walk past the Neighbourhood Centre or down King Street to see evidence of this.

We recorded 632 inquiries related to drug and alcohol services in the 2003-4 financial year. We deal daily with people who are drunk or stoned. Narcotics Anonymous meet here 6 times a week, and at least half of these meetings are attended by well over 50 people. AA fill the hall on Friday nights and Saturday mornings, and both groups have booked rooms throughout the Christmas period, including Christmas Day and New Years Day, to provide additional support to their members. Speaking with any resident in Newtown will confirm that the amount of drug use in the area is a major and growing concern.

Cherie Burton’s letter also refers to the better availability of services and more specialised services at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital. This is not the experience of our front counter workers, who find it difficult to find free D&A counselling services in the area able to deal with referrals.

In short, RPAH has a waiting list of four weeks and Marrickville Community Health cannot take any new clients. It seems the only action taken in this area to address high rates of drug and alcohol issues are policing initiatives such as sniffer dogs at the train station.

Many people who front up to the centre for information and referral to emergency services, including food, accommodation, financial assistance, and legal advice, are trying to pull their lives together. It is essential that while they are thinking this way they can also access real help to address one of the most immediate aspects of their troubles. The decision to do something about an addiction is often a tenuous one. The resolve often will not last four weeks. The high cancellation rate for appointments with the Newtown counsellor at least enabled other people to get an appointment on the same day.

We have enclosed a number of letters signed by local residents in favour of restoring the counselling.

We hope that you can advocate on behalf of this community and restore if not expand this essential service.

Yours Faithfully

Helen Petagna
Coordinator,
Newtown Neighbourhood Centre