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AMA Submission to the Joint Parliamentary Committee on Law Enforcement – Inquiry into crystal methamphetamine

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The AMA is pleased to provide a submission to the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Law Enforcement's Inquiry into crystal methamphetamine. The AMA is very concerned about the health impacts crystal methamphetamine has on users, their families, and the health system.

The Terms of Reference for this Inquiry are largely concerned with issues relating to law enforcement. It is important that there is some focus on issues such as the manufacturing and importation of crystal methamphetamine and its precursors as part of efforts to reduce supply. However, we must tackle the 'Ice' problem on all fronts. There is a critical need for:

- harm reduction approaches and education to reduce the number of people being introduced to crystal methamphetamine, and
- comprehensive community based addiction support services.

Crystal methamphetamine use

While the broader category of methamphetamine use appears to be stable, crystal methamphetamine has recently become the most favoured form of the drug. Because crystal methamphetamine users often have chaotic lives, and because they may be suspicious about participating in surveys, national self-reporting data is likely to under-represent the actual size of the problem. Despite this, national self-report data does indicate that users are using this purer and more harmful form of methamphetamine more frequently. Medical practitioners are seeing an increase in health-related harms, particularly for the frequent users.

National data confirms that crystal methamphetamine is widespread, and not confined to cities or large urban areas. Given their size, it is not surprising that smaller regional and rural communities are more likely to be overwhelmed by the problem.

There is also evidence that some groups within the population are experiencing the impacts of this drug more acutely. For example, there has been a 204 per cent increase in the broader category of methamphetamine use in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Undoubtedly some of this increase will be associated with increased access to, and use of, crystal methamphetamine.

While it is important to acknowledge that some groups are more likely to be using methamphetamines and develop significant harms, the experiences of AMA members is that users from all walks of life present in crisis. Smoking or injecting crystal methamphetamine appears to be associated with an increased likelihood of addiction and serious harm.

Health impacts on individuals

The most significant health impacts of crystal methamphetamine are often on mental health, particularly drug-induced psychosis. Common features include anxiety, severe agitation, major paranoid delusions and fixed delusions about insect and parasite infestations. Users of crystal methamphetamine are five times more likely to experience psychotic symptoms compared to periods of abstinence. It almost goes without saying that management of patients with underlying mental health conditions is extremely problematic when they are also using methamphetamines.

While psychosis is a major concern, many crystal methamphetamine users will also encounter periods of agitation, severe anxiety, aggression, damaged interpersonal relationships, lost employment, impaired concentration and emotional lability. Repeated use can change the brain's chemical/ neurotransmitter systems, and cause physical brain changes with long-term brain damage and altered brain function.

Users also often experience serious physical health-related illness. Crystal methamphetamine can impact on any body system, but illnesses in cerebral and cardiovascular systems, and infections, tend to be more concentrated. In real terms this means users can experience:

- Cardiac problems – tachy arrhythmias, accelerated ischemic heart disease, hypertensive crisis, cardiomyopathy, heart failure, and heart / blood vessel infections;
- Cerebral / CNS problems – intracranial haemorrhage and seizures, accelerated atherosclerosis and stroke, early onset dementia and structural brain abnormalities.

Liver and kidney problems can also be encountered, as well an increased risk of infection (including bone infection) due to depressed immune system and intravenous drug use, increased risk of blood borne viruses (particularly from intravenous use, promiscuity and risk-taking behaviours), increased risk of STIs from high risk behaviour and severe skin and dental problems. Crystal methamphetamine users are also over represented as victims (and perpetrators) of trauma including interpersonal violence and traffic related trauma due to both the effects of the drug on behaviour and high risk lifestyles and criminal activities.

These health impacts are serious and profound. Health professionals may attempt to provide appropriate care, but unfortunately compliance with recommendations (including taking of medication and follow up medical appointments) is often poor. This means that illnesses are often left untreated and progress unchecked with the provision of care complicated and costly as problems escalate out of control.

Impacts on the health system

With such serious health impacts on individuals it should not be surprising that the impacts on the health system are sizeable. Crystal methamphetamine induced psychosis is of particular concern to the medical profession and our clinical colleagues given its severe impacts on emergency departments and psychiatric units and general practices across Australia. Severely

affected patients are dangerous, unpredictable and often require restraint, sedation, prolonged observation and admission. Treating staff are at risk of serious injury, often requiring the support of security personnel. This is not always readily available in the smaller rural and regional health care settings or general /community practice.

Due to the complexity of both mental and physical health problems, users may require extended stays in the acute care setting. Resources are directed at treating these acute problems, but without access to treatment on discharge, and often poor compliance, many users will re-present with similar or even more severe health problems in the near future.

There must be a concerted effort by all Governments to fund and implement long term intensive treatment services.

General practitioners are likely to be the first, and preferred, port of call for most drug users, the vast majority of whom are neither in contact with the police nor specialist drug services. General practitioners are well placed to assist people to prevent dependency as well as the onset of more serious health consequences. There should be investment in general practitioner training about how best to engage drug users and to provide brief motivational interventions that have been demonstrated to lead to positive lifestyle changes and a reduction in drug-related harm.

It is essential that when crystal methamphetamine users do seek access to treatment for their addiction, that medical practitioners have services that they can refer patients to in short time frames and ensure early access to treatment. These services acknowledge that there are high rates of relapse but that over time with the right psychological support, many users are able to overcome their addiction. AMA members advise that at the moment access to suitable treatment services is grossly inadequate. Sustained investment in these services must be part of any national response to crystal methamphetamine.

Reduction in long term use will:

- decrease the market for these drugs,
- reduce criminality in society,
- reduce long-term harms to patients, and their families, and
- reduce the burden on health resourcing.

Given that there is limited access to treatment, it is likely that some crystal methamphetamine users end up being detained by police or jailed. Similar problems to those that are encountered by emergency department staff are likely to be seen in these settings, with the need for restraint and increased levels of observation. This may well redirect police / prison resources away from other important policing matters.

In summary, the use of crystal methamphetamine (Ice), the most dangerous form of methamphetamine, is growing. This growth in use is having severe and long lasting implications for the health of users. In addition to the impacts on an individual's health, there are broader implications on the health system, with more concentrated impacts being felt in emergency departments and psychiatric units across the country. The provision of health care to users is often complex due to the extended nature of health problems and poor compliance with recommendations. Access to suitable treatment services is poor. Law and order responses to the supply and demand of crystal methamphetamine must be balanced with the need to reduce

demand for the drug and provide appropriate health care including referral to treatment services and support for users.

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