



Secretary

Department of Health and Human Services

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Court ref: COR2017002977 and
COR2017002988

e4994499

Sanchia Nigli
Coroner's Registrar
Coroners Court of Victoria
65 Kavanagh Street
SOUTHBANK VIC 3006



Dear Ms Nigli

Thank you for your letters of 22 October 2018 accompanying Coroner English's findings without inquest into the fatal overdose on 23 June 2017 of [REDACTED] and on 24 June 2017 of [REDACTED]

I offer my sincere condolences to the family and friends of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. To lose a loved one under these circumstances is a tragedy. I recognise that the tragedy of overdose is a preventable one – and so I seek to assure you of the efforts the Department of Health and Human Services (department) is taking, and will continue to take, to reduce drug-related harm, prevent fatal overdose and ensure all Victorians can live a life they value.

I note that for both investigations, Coroner English recommended that I, as the Secretary of the department:

1. Note that [the two deaths] occurred within a day of each other in the suburb of St Albans. St Albans is within the City of Brimbank and has a higher concentration of heroin-related deaths than the City of Brimbank as a whole, which itself was, in 2017, the LGA with the highest number of heroin-related deaths in Victoria.
2. Consider applying a place-based approach to drug overdose prevention along the lines of [the department's] place-based approach to suicide prevention, setting a similarly ambitious target for overdose death reduction.

The department accepts both recommendations.

In relation to Recommendation 1, I acknowledge the growing rate of overdose deaths in Victoria and note particularly the heroin-related harms occurring within the City of Brimbank.

The government is committed to minimising drug-related harm, which is why the 2018-19 State Budget included \$259.9 million for alcohol and other drug services – an increase of

57 per cent in the last four years. This includes expanded treatment places across the state, new consumer resources to support people contemplating treatment and new intensive support for individuals and families who have had trouble navigating access to treatment. The department is also developing new anti-stigma guidelines to make health services safer and more accessible for people who use drugs. For further details of the government's efforts to reduce drug-related harm, I draw your attention to my response to Coroner Jamieson on 17 October 2018.

Place-based approaches

In relation to your recommendation that the department apply a place-based approach to overdose prevention (Recommendation 2), I can advise that the department has a number of place-based responses and is actively looking at ways to improve these, using data and local knowledge. Each year, the government invests approximately \$20 million in evidence-based harm reduction initiatives – the majority of which is directed to geographic areas of concentrated harm. This investment includes targeted funding for local needle and syringe program outlets (including in the City of Brimbank) to provide the life-saving medicine naloxone to clients at no charge. The early results of this new program are encouraging: in its first year, well over 2000 Victorians have been trained in the use of naloxone and over 180 overdose reversals have been reported statewide.

In 2019, the department will explore options to enhance the role of peers in harm reduction, simplify access to naloxone and identify innovative outreach options for hard-to-reach, locally-specific populations (including people with prescription drug misuse issues). We are also developing a new performance framework for our funded harm reduction sector, which will be the first of its kind in Victoria and provide the basis for further potential strengthening of place-based overdose prevention.

Reducing overdose

I appreciate that you have also recommended the department consider setting a target for overdose death reduction (Recommendation 2). Before considering the introduction of a target, the department would welcome further work with Coroners Prevention Unit to undertake deeper learning towards a better understanding of the factors contributing to overdoses in our community, and to the development of interventions that will best position us to continually reduce these avoidable and tragic events.

Yours sincerely



Kym Peake
Secretary

31 / 1 / 2019