

This is the unedited version of a column which appeared in *Australian Doctor* in 2002. The published version may have had minor changes.

Media Bites: DOING DRUGS

Why does taking speed affect my mates but not me? Is ecstasy dangerous if I've got asthma? Can mixing ecstasy with alcohol cause a heart attack?

These are the sort of questions that young - and perhaps not so young - Australians ask Paul Dillon when they get together in cyberspace. "Doing Drugs with Paul Dillon" is an online forum of ABC radio's Triple J youth network, aimed at people who use or are considering using drugs.

Dillon, spokesman for the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of NSW, is also a regular guest on Triple J's morning show. He engages well with its audience, providing a real-world view of illicit drug use which treads the fine line of neither exaggerating nor downplaying potential risks.

Dillon, a 42-year-old ex-teacher, has more influence over media coverage of the area than perhaps any other health professional - if he has not been interviewed for a media report, he probably has suggested to the journalist who should be.

Dillon hasn't come to this position of influence because of any scientific or policy expertise that is particularly outstanding; in fact he stumbled into working in drug education, initially at the Centre for Education and Information on Drugs and Alcohol, after doing some drawings for a drug and alcohol resource kit for primary school students.

It's more that he is a skilled communicator who, just as importantly, is willing to engage with the media by being accessible and understanding its needs. Which largely means not speaking in the jargon of academics, researchers or clinicians.

The other reason he has come to such prominence is that, with a few notable exceptions, many experts are not prepared to stick out their necks and comment publicly on the many controversies surrounding illicit drugs.

“There’s a very understandable reluctance in the field to speak out publicly,” says Alex Wodak, director of alcohol and drug services at Sydney’s St Vincent’s Hospital. “Most people who work in the public sector feel intimidated or are actually intimidated. Whether it’s real or perceived, it doesn’t matter, the effect is the same.”

Wodak cites a book by two US academics, “Crack in America: Demon Drugs and Social Justice” as an example of how governments manipulate media coverage of illicit drugs. The book (www.hereinstead.com) argues that in the 1980s the US Government conned a gullible media into whipping up public hysteria about crack out of all all proportion to the actual problem.

NDARC has also fielded its share of angry calls from governments upset at it bringing issues to public attention, says former director Wayne Hall. “On quite a number of occasions, attempts were made to nobble us or to stop us from speaking out on issues.”

Apart from the political dangers, talking to the media about drugs and alcohol can be frustrating, unpopular and unpredictable work.

When news broke that Prince Charles had sent his wayward son to tour a drug treatment facility, Dillon’s phone rang from early in the morning til late at night for days. His message in interview after interview was that different strokes work for different folks but that shock tactics generally are not effective. He was stunned when one newspaper headline translated this into: “Charles got it wrong says expert”.

But there’s been far worse. Apart from flak from colleagues - some resent his high profile, others say that he sometimes gets things wrong - there have been threatening calls from members of the public who haven’t liked something he said.

“The hard part about this job is that you get a lot of criticism,” he says. “It really does impinge on your life.” There’s also been the occasional media disaster, like the time he was asked on TV why people used a particular drug.

”I answered quite innocently at the time, ‘because it’s fun’,” recalls Dillon. The switchboard immediately lit up with angry callers. “I don’t think I’d necessarily say it the same way again,” he adds.

Dillon's appointment at NDARC initially caused some rumblings amongst staff concerned it was diverting funds from research, says Hall. But it's been well justified in the increased profile for the Centre and the field generally, he says.

It's a shame there aren't more people willing - or able - to stand up and be counted.