



## **Inquiry into Methamphetamine (ICE) Use in Northern Territory Submission from St John Ambulance (NT) Inc**

### **Introduction:**

St John Ambulance Australia (NT) Inc welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Inquiry into “Methamphetamine Use” in the Northern Territory particularly in light of recently published anecdotal evidence and academic research, which indicates that the harms arising from Ice use are increasing.

The experience of both our Paramedic and Volunteer areas is suggesting that Ice use has been an escalating problem in the Northern Territory over recent years with devastating results. An example of this is the 2014 Bass in the Grass event which saw a paramedic working alongside volunteer members of our organisation treat 16 patients between the ages of 15-33years old, due to the effects of illicit substances. The presentation of these 16 patients was an increase in drug effected youth by over 200% compared to the 2013 Bass in the Grass event. The presenting signs & symptoms of these patients would indicate they had a toxidrome which is indicative of Methamphetamine use.

### **Forms of Methamphetamine:**

Methamphetamine is a stimulant drug available in a number of different forms. Powder form, traditionally known as ‘speed’, is usually of low purity and can be snorted, injected or taken orally. Methamphetamine base, a damp oily substance, is of higher purity and is typically injected. Crystalline methamphetamine (crystal or “ice”) is methamphetamine in its purest form and is usually smoked or injected.

Methamphetamine can produce an initial sense of well-being and euphoria. It heightens confidence and alertness but intoxication leads to agitation. Pseudoephedrine, available from pharmacies as a symptomatic treatment for the common cold, is the usual base for the illicit manufacture of methamphetamine.

### **Concerns:**

Most of the health problems related to methamphetamine use occur among those who have become dependent on the drug. Risk factors for dependence include smoking, injecting and frequent use, especially in those taking pure forms that produce a more intense high.

Dependent methamphetamine users often experience serious mental health problems, with common features including agitation or aggression, depression and anxiety, impaired concentration and motivation, and psychosis. These features sometimes, but not always, improve with abstinence. Dependent users can also have poor physical health including insomnia, poor appetite, weight loss, palpitations, nasal problems (related to snorting) and injecting site abscesses.

There are predominantly two groups of Methamphetamine users that are effecting the work carried out by St John Ambulance in the Northern Territory. Group one are the group with Methamphetamine-induced psychosis which is of particular concern to the paramedics, with paranoia and hallucinations being prominent clinical features of psychotic episodes. This group of patients poses a significant risk to paramedics as they are generally agitated and can become, and frequently do become aggressive and combative. These patients frequently require sedation and restraint in the form of protecting the patient from injuring themselves or others.

Restraining patients that become aggressive and combative due to the effects of any illicit substance poses a significant risk to the health and safety of the patients and of those that are required to restrain the patient for their own safety. In the context of an ambulance vehicle this can occur in the confines of limited space in the back of an ambulance and additionally, any agitated patient that is transported in the back of an ambulance without restraint poses a significant risk to the crew of that ambulance along with other road users.

Patients within group two are those patients that may have or infrequently use illicit substances such as Methamphetamine. Within this group we also see a large number that report to have had their food or drink spiked with an illicit substance and present to paramedics or St John volunteer members at events with a toxidrome. Again these toxidromes are consistent with Methamphetamine use. This groups of patients either require significant time having their vital signs monitored or require transport to a hospital.

#### **Evidence of methamphetamine use in the Northern Territory:**

The findings of a recent study in the Medical Journal of Australia have been well-publicised. The report outlines that ambulance call-outs to ice related cases has grown in all states and territories in the past two years and harm from ice has risen. While overall meth and amphetamine use remains stable in the general population, ice use is rising among some groups of existing drug users.

Anecdotal evidence from doctors and agencies such as the Association of Alcohol and Other Drug Agencies NT (AADANT), suggest that ice use is appearing across all socio-economic groups within the Northern Territory including Indigenous communities. Antidotal and limited statistical evidence from patient reports completed by paramedics would also support this trend. The introduction of an electronic patients reporting system within St John Ambulance Northern Territory will mean improved statistical information will be available in the future about trend seen in patients effected by Methamphetamines and other substances.

#### **Consequences of methamphetamine use:**

Methamphetamine use impacts across all areas of society, which is why the use of illicit substances and particularly methamphetamine use is an urgent and pressing public health problem. Methamphetamine can be taken in a home environment or at events with friends. St John Ambulance volunteer members



covering first aid at events are frequently advised that using ice is cheaper and has a longer effect than alcohol and they feel better once they use it. Whether it is a first time user or regular user of ice they always underestimate the risks of dependence and their health consequences.

### **Impact on Ambulance services in the Northern Territory:**

As outlined above, many of those who are agitated or psychotic are also heavily intoxicated with alcohol, increasing the risks of aggression towards paramedics, general public and creating clinical management challenges. Presentations related to amphetamines are typically of high acuity, result in prolonged treatment times with ambulance crew requiring additional ambulance and police resources just to manage a single patient. A significant proportion will require sedation, restraint for protection of themselves, the general public, paramedics and other road users. Additionally, with the growing demand on ambulance resources the requirements for multiple ambulance resources to manage single patients due to illicit substance use, places significant strain on already limited ambulance resources. This additional demand does effect response times to other high acuity ambulance cases.

### **Recommendations:**

A range of targeted strategies including a comprehensive public education program on the health and social consequences are needed to reduce harmful effects of methamphetamine use. Public policy should provide for programs aimed at young people. St John Ambulance currently run a range of school based programs aimed at teaching basic First Aid principal in school. With appropriate funding the expansion of this school and youth based cadet programs could be expanded to include education on the effects of illicit substances such as Methamphetamine. The programs currently run by St John Ambulance through the charitable arm of the organisation targets to teach First Aid to every Northern Territory child. In 2014 we were able to teach our first aid program to 10,334 students.

In addition to teaching our First Aid in schools program our community education officers also deliver some sort of first aid to the elderly, new mothers and community groups such as scouts and girl guides. Also, St John Ambulance through its youth development area, have over 200 cadets across all major population centres in the Northern Territory. This cadet program run by St John Ambulance, suppliers training in a range of leadership and personal development skills across a diverse social economic group of young Territorians and all with no financial impact on their families. The training provided to these young Territorians by St John already allows them to spread a range of health messages within their schools and peer groups, due to the training they receive as members of St John Ambulance.

Ambulances and events run in the Northern Territory must be adequately staffed to ensure personal safety of the public that attend these events at all times. Events where there is a plan to have alcohol on sales should also be required to have an ambulance present as these are the events that paramedics/volunteer members frequently see people using Methamphetamine. Acute management of patients prior to arrival at a medical facility is best handled by a multidisciplinary emergency response team consisting of Intensive Care Paramedics, Paramedics and Police. These multidisciplinary teams



need to be well trained and practice in working together to minimise risk to the patient, bystanders and themselves. This specialised team training within organisations will need to receive funding support to ensure the organisations are capable of running such specialised training.

There should be a sustained investment in the training of paramedics on how best to engage drug users. Additionally, financial support should be made available to organisations such as St John Ambulance to expand the work it currently undertakes within schools in the Northern Territory. Education on the effects of illicit drugs such as Methamphetamine along with basic principles of First Aid lead to a better informed and educated society which will lead to better decision making as these young Territorians move in to adult hood.