

SJ's "Letter to Hong Kong" (English only)

The following is the "Letter to Hong Kong" by the Secretary for Justice, Mr Wong Yan Lung, SC, broadcast on Radio Television Hong Kong today (July 6):

Dear Mr Kwan,

I wish to thank you again for sharing with us your struggles over your son's addiction at last week's launching ceremony of the new anti-drug publicity campaign. As the headmaster who stood up from the audience said, your experience is a stern reminder to all parents alike.

The drug problem among Hong Kong's youth

Ever since I joined the Fight Crimes Committee more than two years ago, I became very concerned with the increase of young people abusing psychotropic substances. Although the overall number of people taking drugs has dropped, the number of drug users under the age of 21 has been on the rise since 2004. Last year, there was an alarming 13% rise in the number of young drug abusers. The trend has continued in 2008, with a 15% increase in the first quarter. Over 99% of them are cases involving psychotropic substances with Ketamine topping the list.

Since the Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse was set up last October, I have seen with my own eyes the devastating effects these drugs are inflicting on our young people. Ketamine, Ecstasy and other drugs are shattering their health, studies, career, and families. They are undermining the fabric of our society, and sapping the strength and future of Hong Kong.

Unlike traditional drugs such as heroin, psychotropic substance abuse is more "hidden" because the drugs can be sniffed or swallowed, rather than injected. Its harmful effects may not be so immediate or prominent at the beginning, but the damage is long-term and often irreversible. It is saddening to see many young people failing to realise or understand the severe and permanent damage these psychotropic substances can cause.

You may have heard that in a landmark decision delivered last month, the Court of Appeal substantially raised the sentencing tariffs for trafficking Ketamine and Ecstasy.

The Court accepted the compelling medical evidence regarding the effect of the drug addiction. Ketamine, for example, causes serious impairment to memory, thinking and speech. In addition, it adversely affects the functions of the heart, lungs, kidney and other organs of the body. Many addicts have to visit the lavatory every 15 minutes or so. The Court held in no uncertain terms that psychotropic substances are seriously addictive and dangerous.

The work of the Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse

The Task Force on Youth Drug Abuse has been working hard to tackle the drug abuse problem at its root. We will focus on five areas: first, prevention and education to reduce demand; second, early identification of young addicts for treatment and rehabilitation; third, strengthening law enforcement on all fronts; fourth, enhancing greater cooperation with the Mainland and globally; and fifth, increasing relevant research work to back up all the other efforts.

The school sector is a most important partner in our preventive education efforts. There are 900,000 primary and secondary students in Hong Kong. According to the Central Registry of Drug Abuse, half of the reported young drug abusers started taking drugs when they were only 15 or younger. The most common reason cited was peer pressure.

Just last Friday, I joined an anti-drugs seminar at which many primary and secondary principals exchanged views on anti-drug efforts in schools. I appealed to them to develop a healthy school policy with an anti-drug element. The Government will provide more training for school principals, teachers, guidance counsellors, school social workers and parents to help them deliver drug education, identify high-risk youths, and handle drug abuse cases. Resource kits will also be produced. I am very encouraged by the positive response from the principals.

The police-school liaison scheme will be enhanced to enable the Police to continue to play their important preventive role on campus. Communication between Police and school management will be stepped up.

On the social work front, new resources will strengthen the youth outreach teams and overnight outreaching services. This will help us engage more young drug abusers earlier, provide immediate intervention, and facilitate referrals of needy cases.

Private general medical practitioners see thousands of patients a day. We have started a new scheme providing these doctors with more knowledge of youth drug abuse, so that they can help with the early identification and intervention work, and motivate patient abusers to seek further help.

These initiatives are just part of a package of interim measures we are pursuing with additional funding of \$53 million. The Task Force is now working intensively to draw up comprehensive, sustainable strategies and measures to tackle youth drug abuse.

Drug tests

One long-term measure that has generated a lot of discussion is drug testing. Advocates say drug testing would be a powerful tool to identify youngsters taking drugs, and to help them realise the harm.

But, some have expressed concern on its effectiveness. Others have warned that a proper balance need be struck against human rights protection.

We need to act very prudently here and cannot merely copy what is being done by some or elsewhere. But the feasibility and appropriateness of some kind of

voluntary programme, that is based on parental consent in the school sector, is certainly worth studying in depth.

Another controversial idea is allowing law enforcement officers to administer drug tests on persons suspected of having taken illicit drugs. Consumption of psychotropic substances is an offence. Of course we are not considering it with a view to easing prosecution. The aim is to enhance early intervention and rehabilitation. Experience elsewhere tells us that a degree of coercion and deterrent is necessary in this battle. Again a proper balance need be struck and other legal issues are engaged. These are difficult questions the community needs to deliberate carefully before we can move forward.

Community involvement

The response to our campaign last week was very encouraging. I am pleased that our work has already attracted much interest and support in the community.

But the Government cannot fight this battle alone. Youth drug abuse is often just a symptom of deeper problems faced by young people relating to their family, personal growth, learning, or social adjustment.

To tackle these problems at root, it is essential to mobilize the community to ignite a caring culture by providing encouragement and assistance to our young people through innovative ways. I have great admiration for those police colleagues who use their spare time to organize boxing teams and invite vulnerable young people to join. Through the hobby, the discipline, the friendship and mentorship, the policemen friends manage to restore those young people back onto the right path.

So, Mr Kwan, don't lose hope. There are many in this community who stand ready to help your son and others in this battle against drug. We will do whatever we can to say, with action and unity, to our young people: "No Drugs. No Regrets. Not Now. Not Ever."

Yours sincerely,

Wong Yan Lung

Ends/Sunday, July 6, 2008