Media Release

LONG TERM STEROID USE LINKED TO MAJOR HEALTH HARMs

As anabolic steroid use increases in Australia, health experts are warning that the true long-term health impacts of these drugs are only just being understood.

"The alarming scientific findings are beginning to filter in,” said Professor Harrison Pope, from Harvard Medical School, who is presenting new US research to Australian health experts at the APSAD Alcohol and Drugs Conference in Melbourne today.

"For more than ten years now we have been worrying that we will soon start seeing the impact of long-term anabolic steroid use, and now it is beginning to happen. Users need to be aware, clinicians need to be aware and services need to prepare. In the US, a potential public health crisis is looming,” he said.

Use of anabolic-androgenic steroids (AAS) began among elite athletes in the 1950’s, but AAS use did not spread to the broader population until the 1980’s and 1990’s. Today, most illicit AAS users are not competitive athletes, but simply rank-and-file gym clients. The oldest members of this large new group, who began AAS use as youths in the 80’s and 90’s, are only now reaching middle age, where the long-term health harms of AAS are starting to become evident.

A recent US study published this year – the first large controlled study of its kind – proved irrefutably the long-term cardiovascular toxicity of AAS, with 3 out of 86 of the AAS users recruited already having experienced a heart attack by age 45.

Another study has shown that many men experience protracted severe hypogonadism, where testosterone levels plummet and the testes shrink, with an associated drop in libido and erectile disfunction. The latest studies indicate that some men may never recover normal testicular function, even after many years.

There is also new evidence to suggest that very high circulating levels of testosterone and other AAS may lead to premature death of brain cells. This means that long-term AAS users may possibly be at risk for developing cognitive deficits or even dementia at a premature age.

In Australia, AAS use is generally under-researched and very little is known about the long-term affects. But it is an area experts are now turning to.

"We believe that anabolic steroid use in Australia is increasing. We know the immediate and short-term harms they cause, but we’ve always been less clear about the long-term impacts. As research like this starts to emerge, we want users to consider the implications and make an informed choice,” said Dr. Matthew Dunn, APSAD Conference Co-Convenor and Senior Lecturer at Deakin University. Dr. Dunn is a leading researcher in this field.
“Do they have a family history of heart problems? Are they young now, but want to have a family in the future? If your body stops producing testosterone and doesn’t start back up, who will you go to seek help?”

“This is clearly an area we need to understand better and communicate to those using these drugs,” he said.

Dr Matthew Dunn will also be presenting his paper “Information sought, information shared: exploring performance and image enhancing drug user-facilitated harm reduction information in online forums” at APSAD 2017.

Anabolic-Androgenic Steroid (AAS) Use in Australia

- A national study from 2012 found two-thirds of young men who began injecting drugs within the past three years were using steroids, overtaking methamphetamine and heroin use.
- AAS interceptions by the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service increased a staggering 174% from 2696 in 2009/2010 to 7381 in 2014/15.
- The situation in Australia reflects current trends in the United Kingdom, where AAS were the only drug type to experience a significant increase in use in 2016. AAS use was largely reported by young men aged 16-24 years, and scholars suggest that these increases may be driven by pressures to conform to appearance ideals perpetuated through traditional and social media.
- AAS use has been linked to high blood pressure, heart attack, stroke, acne and skin infections, liver damage, tendon rupture, premature baldness and stunted bone growth in adolescents. There are also psychological implications such as addiction, mood syndromes and body image disorders. As many of these substances are injected, there are also potential harms from unsafe injecting practises.

For essential information on Anabolic-Androgenic Steroids (AAS) visit the US National Institute on Drug Abuse website.

Media Contact: Petrana Lorenz 0405 158 636
petrana@arkcommunications.com.au

ABOUT THE APSAD SCIENTIFIC ALCOHOL AND DRUGS CONFERENCE 2017
The annual scientific conference of the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD) is the Southern Hemisphere’s largest summit on alcohol and other drugs featuring latest insights into major alcohol and other drugs issues facing society today. Below is a snapshot of key topics for media. All material is under embargo until the day specified.

- View the APSAD Sydney 2017 Program
- Read more about the Australasian Professional Society on Alcohol and other Drugs (APSAD)
- Contact Petrana Lorenz to arrange an interview or find out about other key topics.

MONDAY 13 NOVEMBER

HIGH HOPES FOR PILL TESTING AS NEW EVIDENCE HIGHLIGHTS BENEFITS
Previously unpresented results from UK trials presented on Monday will show irrefutably that pill testing can significantly reduce harms and provide valuable real time information on drug consumption and composition. So what is Australia waiting for?

International Spokesperson: Professor Fiona Meacham.
HEALTH PROFESSIONALS IMPLICATED IN PHARMACEUTICAL DRUG MISUSE
Drug induced deaths are on the rise in Australia with middle aged men, living outside a capital city and misusing prescription drugs, the most likely casualties. A new study looking at the pharmaceutical drug supply shows the involvement of health care professionals driven by their own substance abuse issues, challenges in handling difficult patients or the desire for financial gain.
Spokesperson: Dr Suzanne Nielsen, Senior Research Fellow, National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL ON THE RISE IN OVER 50s
Australians over 50 years are increasing their alcohol and drug use at alarming rates.
Spokesperson: Professor Ann Roche, Director of the National Centre for Education and Training on Addiction, Flinders University.

YOUNG TRADIES AT HIGH RISK OF HARM FROM DRUGS, ALCOHOL
Apprentices employed in the construction industry have been found to be a high risk group for alcohol and other drug-related harm.
Spokesperson: Associate Professor Ken Pidd, Deputy Director (Research) at NCETA

TUESDAY 14 NOVEMBER
LONG TERM STEROID USE LINKED TO MAJOR HEALTH HARMS
Adverse effects of long-term AAS exposure may create a growing public-health problem as increasing numbers of users reach middle age and beyond. "The alarming scientific findings are beginning to filter in," said Professor Harrison Pope, from Harvard Medical School who is presenting new US research to Australian health experts. "Users need to be aware, clinicians need to be aware and services need to prepare."

NEW OPIOID THREAT HAS SERVICES ON HIGH ALERT
More supervised injecting centres and drug surveillance required
Calls for the introduction of supervised injecting rooms across Australia have ramped up as new research highlights the dangers of fentanyl – a prescription opioid commonly prescribed for cancer pain and which is 50 to 100 times more concentrated than morphine. Experts also fear fentanyl-laced heroin could enter Australia and result in the unprecedented deaths currently being seen in the North America. It is critical Australia be prepared to respond, they say.
Information collected from a first fentanyl surveillance pilot study will be presented.
Spokesperson: Dr Monica Barratt, Drug Policy Researcher at UNSW

WEDNESDAY 15 NOVEMBER
EXPERTS OK TIPPLE FOR BREASTFEEDING MUMS
Low level drinking during breastfeeding is not linked with shorter breastfeeding duration or adverse outcomes in infants up to 12 months of age. In fact, infants whose mothers drank at 8 weeks postpartum had more favourable results for personal-social development compared with those whose mothers abstained.
Spokesperson: Delyse Hutchinson, Senior Research Fellow at the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC)

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