Drugs in the driver’s seat

Ballina MP and shadow roads minister Don Page has welcomed plans by the NSW government to test drivers involved in an accident on roadside drug testing. The test could involve submitting a sample of saliva for analysis.

The Roads and Traffic Authority and NSW Police will monitor roadside drug tests which are confirmed to have occurred in Victoria. Apparently a drug test trial could begin in NSW by the end of the year.

Drug use, particularly illegal and prescription drugs in conjunction with alcohol, is definitely a safety issue for road users. The introduction of drug testing will be a cultural issue for a north coast community with a good percentage of illicit drug use. According to Mr Page research done by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research found that ‘more than one in ten people aged 18-29 in the Byron area have at some stage driven a vehicle while under the influence of cannabis. Drivers who use cannabis and drive shortly after are seven times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash than a drug free driver.

To his credit Mr Page is also advocating education awareness programs to discourage drug driving and screening for prescription drugs as well as amphetamines and cannabis. His position is entirely consistent with his earlier comments and firm rejection of proposals to decriminalise marijuana.

The great killer on our roads is alcohol but it would be disingenuous to think that cannabis is entirely innocent. The effect of prescription drugs such as antidepressants or sedatives also warrants investigation.

Drug testing will be an invasion of privacy. Random breath testing is also an invasion of privacy but it is an invasion the community is prepared to wear in the interests of road safety.

For the government to justify an added invasion, the scientific research must be thorough. How accurate will the tests be? Will the detection of cannabis, for instance, be able to differentiate between recent use and residual and will the authorities construct a scale, as with alcohol, which determines if the level of drugs found in the blood is beyond an acceptable threshold?

As users of cannabis, which is a common recreational drug on the north coast, how far will the consequences of the test go? Will the same laws apply as with alcohol use, or will there be a further prosecution for use of a prohibited substance? In the test of civil liberties, there is a line where a justified prosecution can descend into unwarranted persecution.

The Echo maintains that cannabis abuse is a health issue not a criminal matter and that decriminalisation is a better social outcome than creating a criminal underclass out of people who prefer marihuana to a legal recreational drug such as alcohol.

That said, driving under a skills-impairing dose of drugs of any kind is not acceptable to the responsible road user, and any test, along with an educational program, which can help to ensure that behaviour is an appropriate response to community concerns.

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By Mungo MacCallum

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