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Australian cities struck by crystal meth epidemic see addicts flock abroad for treatment

Australia has seen a surge in the use of crystal methamphetamine, often referred to as ice, in recent years with some reports suggesting that as many as 10% of Australians have used the drug. Sydney, Perth and Melbourne have been the hardest hit by the increase in popularity of one of the most dangerous and disturbing drugs ever to come into popular recreational usage.

Stimulant drugs like meth are psychologically rather than physically addictive making treatment a much more complicated process. Pharmacologists and psychiatrists have been unable thus far to isolate effective medical interventions and while anti psychotic drugs, anti depressants and even Valium can be used to calm symptoms none are a particularly effective response.

For this reason, Australian meth users who can afford to do so are increasingly looking overseas in search of sophisticated medical help. Ironically, given that most of the meth on the streets here is imported from South East Asia, a treatment centre in Thailand is at the cutting edge of the fight against meth addiction.

As program director at The Cabin, a 25 bed rehab program based in Chiang Mai, Alastair Mordey witnesses first hand the fall out from Australia's ice epidemic; "A significant percentage of our clients are meth users, many of them from Sydney, Perth and Melbourne. If you are treated as an inpatient in Australia it will usually only be for the designated detox period of around two weeks. Even if a user succeeds in getting clean during that period the chances of them relapsing once they are back in the community are extremely high. Residential treatment is essential for people whose drug use has become chaotic because there are so many triggers in their normal neighbourhoods."

One of the clients who attended The Cabin Chiang Mai treatment program for ice addiction was James, a 32 year old advertising sales executive from Melbourne. James realised he needed residential treatment at the end of last year and attended a 45 day treatment program.

"I had previously drunk alcohol socially and smoked a few joints of marijuana since my university years. Back in 2008 I went to a friend's house warming party and a couple of the guys were smoking ice and I decided to give it a try. I didn't touch it again for a couple of months and then a girl I started dating liked to smoke so we would smoke a couple of times a month at the weekend.

Over time, I would hassle my girlfriend to smoke a few more times a month, and then a few more times per week. In the end we split up, not because of the drugs but because we just moved on. At first, that was great because she was the one who would always procure the ice so I ended up not using for about 2 months. Of course, I ended up bumping into an acquaintance who could get hold of ice and I bought some and ended up starting again. From there, it actually went downhill quite quickly. I started smoking pretty much every evening and of course that led to a lot of sleepless nights.

My friends and family had been concerned for a while but finally my brother told me that I wasn't the guy I used to be and I decided to do something about it. I had been recommended The Cabin Chiang Mai by one of the counsellors I had seen before and gave them a call, went through the process and flew over there this time last year. It wasn't easy, particularly in the first week where I was just so weepy and tired. But after that I really got into the program and having that opportunity to get away from Melbourne allowed me to focus on my recovery and not worry about the mess I had left behind. I completed my 45 days and the 8 weeks of aftercare when I was back at home. It hasn't always been easy, but The Cabin plugged me

into a network of professional and peer support back in Melbourne and I have just celebrated my first year clean. While it wasn't as hedonistic as my previous celebrations, it meant so much to me that I have got my life back on track before it became too late.”

Mordey feels that a more sophisticated and subtle approach is required because traditional treatment methods are not as effective when dealing with this comparatively new drug; “We use cognitive and behavioural therapy which basically means looking at your addictive thought processes and attempting to change it. Without learning new behaviours and returning the brain back to a normal state of functionality users cannot hope to stay off meth for long.”

Prevention is an important part of the process of decreasing the availability of meth on Australian streets but it will never be one hundred per cent successful. This is why it is essential that effective treatment is made available to addicts, if it is not then society will continue to bear the brunt of the meth pandemic.

Editor's Notes:

Alastair Mordey (BA hons, RDAP, ADAP) is the Programme Director and Head Counsellor at The Cabin, an addiction treatment centre in Chiang Mai. He is a certified and accredited addiction counsellor with over 10 years' experience working in treatment services. Website: www.thecabinchiangmai.com.

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