

As former members of the Commonwealth Parliament, a Health Minister in the Hawke Government and a former general practitioner serving in the Howard Government and the Abbott opposition, we are deeply concerned over the short-sighted decision of the current government to axe funding to the Alcohol and other Drugs Council of Australia (ADCA).

Following our parliamentary careers we have both had the opportunity to serve as ADCA's President.

It is disturbing that after 46 years policy development, advocacy and advice to governments, ADCA is now a victim of the new government's cost cutting – all for a saving of only \$1.5 million in annual funding. It is a false economy. It is also obvious that the officials who advised government had little appreciation of ADCA's role in the broader health and wellbeing sector, or the implications of its demise as a national peak body representing tens of thousands of individual workers in one of the most demanding industries in the country.

This is an issue that will echo across Australia – not only in the cities but in country towns, in rural and remote areas, in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. For that is the extent of the territory that falls within ADCA's ambit.

We would welcome the opportunity to set the record straight, to speak direct to Ministers Dutton, Nash, Cormann and Hockey about this socially backward step. One has only to look at social media traffic to see how unpopular – and far-reaching – the move is.

We use this opportunity to correct misinformation – particularly unfounded reports concerning ADCA's financial "difficulties". The only financial difficulties are the work of governments (despite assurances from mid-April that increased funding was stable through to the end of the 2014/15 financial year) which have not provided any core funding since 1 July this year.

ADCA has always been a lean concern in nearly half a century of operation, with past staff going on to other positions in the ever widening realms of health and wellbeing. Its demise will leave a huge gap.

The loss of knowledge when employees retire or change jobs warrants serious consideration; decades of expertise can potentially be gone in a flash. That's the situation people represented by ADCA face. They will be intellectually poorer – as will public health institutions, researchers and students – and their voice will be lost.

What sets ADCA apart is the huge resource it has amassed over the past four decades under the guise of first, the National Resource Centre, then the National Drug Sector Information Service (NDSIS). Clearly, those advising the government did not appreciate the significance of this resource – nearly 100,000 items and one of the world's outstanding Alcohol and other Drug reference holdings. The number of post graduate students who have used the resource on the path to doctorates is alone testament to its relevance.

ADCA has been investigating digitising the entire holding, which would mean even greater ease of access.

The news that this world class resource, which regularly deals with requests from Australian government departments for guidance and information, could cease to exist as part of an ill-considered savings measure warrants the outrage it has prompted.

We are concerned that a national peak organisation of such depth, with a reputation for informed opinion and decades of advocacy, should be summarily destroyed. The decision came out of the blue and reflects poorly on the government, which has thus far refused to heed any approaches on the issue – ours included.

We urge people who feel strongly about this issue to sign a petition to the Prime Minister seeking to reverse the decision. This is attracting strong support <http://chn.ge/1b9KBCx>

Neal Blewett and Mal Washer

ADCA Presidents

(Neal Blewett 2002/6 – Mal Washer 2012 – present)