

**Speech Notes for the Opening Session**  
**International Symposium on Drug Policy**  
**Tim Harding, Chair, New Zealand Drug Foundation**

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Kia Ora Koutou Katoa

My name is Tim Harding and I'm the Chair of the New Zealand Drug Foundation

It is a great pleasure and a privilege to welcome you all to this very exciting event:

The International Drug Policy Symposium

“Through the Maze – Healthy Drug Law”

Before we proceed however, I would like to give a special welcome to our friends from Australia and offer our deepest sympathies for the terrible losses suffered in the Victorian fires.

We can only imagine the pain and suffering they have caused. Our thoughts are with you and all those affected.

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I would like to acknowledge some very important people who are with us today:

Associate Health Minister The Honourable Peter Dunne

Members of parliament

Mr Sandeep Chawla, UN Office on Drugs and Crime

Members of the judiciary – Honorable Andrew Becroft & Justice Ronald Young

Dr Lidia Laksana Hijat – Centre for Community Development in Indonesia

Nuno Maria Roque Horhay (Jorge) – IFNGO

Augusto Norguiera – Macau

And a special acknowledgement for Professor Sir John Scott the founding Chairman of the New Zealand Drug Foundation - WELCOME

There are many important people who have come a long way to be here who you will get to know as they speak during the symposium and we thank them

all very much for their commitment to the development of healthy drug policy.

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So what is this?

A symposium – Wikipedia says:

Symposium - originally referred to a drinking party (the Greek verb *sympotein* means "to drink together") however it has since come to refer to any [academic conference](#), or style of university class characterized by being openly discursive.

Well you might say that's pretty ironic in that Alcohol is still the cause of the most carnage of all drugs in our New Zealand communities. When discussing drug policy we must never forget that point.

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When I looked at the name, the agenda and the eminence of the people attending I had that flash of insecurity “ Who am I to be opening such an event with such an array of important people, with such knowledge and wisdom in the area of Drug Policy?”

So I thought I would start with my reasons for being passionate about improving drug policy to better support those affected by the use of legal and illegal substances:

I lost my sister and my best friend to drug overdose

I have been addicted to drugs and have used the full spectrum of treatment services along the Harm Reduction continuum including Abstinence.

I have worked at all levels of treatment and now lead a service, Care NZ, that treats 2700 people a year in the community and our prison system.

While doing this I see the sickening destruction men, women and their families suffer as a result of drug abuse and dependence and the terrible damage done to our wider communities.

So I care, I really care that we take this issue seriously and not get stuck in philosophical agendas, simplistic fundamentalist quick fixes or easy political point scoring.

The problem we face is that sound policy is not always popular or for that matter, obvious, and must be based on the solid foundations of research, experience a liberal dose of wisdom.

Popular, fear based thinking, so often falls short of these things.

The New Zealand Drug Foundation puts out an excellent magazine, “Matters of Substance”. In the latest addition is an essay that clearly outlines the Drug Foundation’s vision of a way forward.

It discusses the disparity between our NDP (which aims at a balance between reducing supply, demand and harm) and the outdated laws that place so much of the burden and responsibility on our police and justice system to solve this destructive issue that is after all a public health one.

This symposium has not, as has already been misunderstood in the media, got an agenda to legalise drugs - far from it. It is an extraordinary opportunity to put together informed minds that are able to grasp the complexities of this issue, to discuss and debate better ways of addressing the damage that drugs do to ourselves, our friends, whanau and our wider communities.

We need to grasp this opportunity with an *open mind* and learn as much as we can. Our future generations depend on our ability to find better ways of supporting people who struggle with drugs.

So often those people are the same ones that struggle with poor education, high unemployment, social inequalities and mental health problems.

Do we ask the police and the justice system to solve these or do we work together to achieve the best possible balance of support to enable a better life for all New Zealanders.

Whether we enter these conversations with liberal or conservative beliefs, lets hear each other and take particular heed of those that come from a place of evidence rather than dogma.

This is the challenge – lets begin

Thank you