

**SPEECH BY MR DESMOND LEE, SENIOR MINISTER OF
STATE, MINISTRY OF HOME AFFAIRS
FOR LAUNCH OF SANA'S NEW BRAND IDENTITY
AT STEP-UP CENTRE, SINGAPORE ANTI-NARCOTICS
ASSOCIATION (SANA), 24 MARCH 2017 (FRIDAY), 4.00PM**

Mrs Quek Bin Hwee, President, SANA
Members of the SANA Board of Management
Members of CARE Network and Community Partners
Ladies and Gentlemen

Introduction

1. I am happy to join you to launch the new brand identity for the Singapore Anti-Narcotics Association (SANA). It carries positive messages such as building self-esteem, determination and positive thinking, and the new identify focuses on connecting with young people, and getting them to play a bigger role as positive influencers. This marks a new and important phase in SANA's engagement with youths, ex-drug abusers and their families, and persons struggling with drug issues.

2. This is very timely.

Current Drug Situation

3. Although our overall drug abuse situation today is under control, if we do not stay vigilant and step up our efforts, we

could see an increase in drug use in Singapore. Why do I say so? I will highlight just three of the challenges we face.

4. First, the **increase in the number of young drug abusers** is of concern. Those in the 20 to 29 age group continue to form the largest group of abusers detected, at about 41%. Last year, close to two-thirds of new drug abusers arrested were under the age of 30.

5. Young people are influenced by the growing acceptance of recreational drug use overseas, such as cannabis. A survey conducted by the National Council Against Drug Abuse (NCADA) last year found that young people below the age of 30 were more open-minded towards drugs, as compared to three years ago. We have also seen a 16% increase in the number of new cannabis abusers arrested last year.

6. This trend is worrying. Some people may think that cannabis is a “soft” drug or less harmful, and it is ok to experiment with them. This applies not only to young people with at-risk backgrounds, but also those from better off families, or those doing well in school.

7. Second challenge is the **availability of illicit drugs online**. Last year, about 200 people were arrested for buying drugs and drug-related paraphernalia on the internet, compared to just 30 in 2015. Online black market sites allow users to buy drugs anonymously. The drugs are couriered in small parcels, unmarked, innocuous-looking and difficult to track. The young are especially susceptible, as they are tech-savvy and think that they are unlikely to get caught.

8. Third, as a backdrop to these local developments, it is worth reminding ourselves that there is an active push by many groups, internationally, to legalise, commercialise and market the recreational use of drugs. I just came back from a United Nations Commission on Narcotic Drugs (CND) meeting a week ago. I decided to attend a side event, organised by an international NGO. Their view is that governments should not interfere with people's human right to consume drugs, because they claim that drug abuse does not harm anyone else. They go on to argue that governments should not prosecute drug traffickers or drug producers, but only go after the drug kingpins. And then they say the next logical step should be to regulate and legalise the use of drugs, and treat them as just another substance that may be harmful to the human body. They were not just talking about cannabis, but also other illicit substances such as heroin, Ice and other drugs.

9. Alongside this agenda, we also see a lot of half-truths or falsehoods about drug use circulating online, on social media.

10. Some claim that cannabis is not harmful. This is not true. A team of psychiatrists and researchers from the Institute of Mental Health conducted a literature review on cannabis in 2015. They reviewed more than 500 papers from reputable international medical journals. There is clear evidence that cannabis is both harmful and addictive. For example, prolonged cannabis use can lead to serious mental illnesses such as schizophrenia, depression and bipolar disorder.

11. Some advocate that drug use is a personal choice and do not harm others. This is also not true. Many innocent parties are harmed – families, children. Numerous news articles,

including the New York Times and AFP, reported on the “drug epidemic” faced by the US. For example, mothers who were drug addicts gave birth to babies with drug dependency. Between 2000 and 2012, the number of babies born with drug dependency in the US had increased by about 5 times. Many of us may also recall the photo circulating on social media last year, of a couple from Ohio who passed out in their car after taking heroin – while their four-year-old son was left alone at the back of the car. We see many sad cases in Singapore. Last year, we arrested a man for drug trafficking. But what we found next was worse. He had actually taught his two teenage sons to smoke Ice. He actively supplied their drug habit and made his own sons addicts. As a result of drug abuse, innocent young lives and families are destroyed.

SANA’s New Brand Identity and Engagement Strategy

12. We need to tackle these challenges in a comprehensive manner. We do this through a robust harm prevention strategy, comprising:

- Upstream prevention to educate the public, especially children and young people, about the real danger of drugs.
- Tough laws and robust enforcement against traffickers and drug offenders, and
- Structured, mandatory rehabilitation to help abusers kick the habit and regain control over their mind and body.

The fight against drugs requires the community's active participation.

13. The launch of SANA's new brand identity is therefore timely. We share SANA's hope to inspire our young to "rise above the influence", make the right choice, and say no to drugs.

14. Along with its new brand identity, SANA has revamped its strategy to engage young people, and to strengthen its fight against drugs. For example, SANA's new e-portal, Talk2SANA.com, provides young people with a single point of access to issues on drug abuse. The platform has an e-chat function, where our youth can seek online counselling and assistance when they face the temptation of drugs. This platform is confidential and anonymous. Talk2SANA.com also contains an online resource centre to provide young people, parents and educators with information on the harmful consequences of drug abuse. Accurate information on drugs is critical to address the risk of youth drug abuse.

15. Other than reaching out to youths, SANA also works extensively with ex-drug abusers and their families. For example, ex-abusers and their families can visit the SANA Step-Up Centre, where we are today, for assistance. This includes financial assistance, advice on skills upgrading and referrals to pro-social networks. The centre also functions as an activities hub for counselling activities, family enrichment programmes and support group meetings. I am happy to hear that since it was set up in January 2015, more than 800 ex-abusers and their families have benefited from this.

Conclusion

16. I would like to congratulate SANA and your volunteers on the good work done, and encourage you to continue your effort towards achieving a drug-free Singapore.

17. I wish SANA every success and urge all of us here to extend your continued support to SANA.

18. Thank you.
