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Expert pushes drug court

By EMMA SPILLETT

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A drug court would save money, reduce recidivism and decrease crime, a University of Wollongong senior lecturer has claimed.

Dr Mitchell Byrne, a forensic psychologist, believes the specialist court's therapeutic approach, focusing on keeping offenders out of jail and breaking their drug habits, lowers incarceration expenses, crime rates and costs to victims and the community.

Dr Byrne is one of four academics from the university who have delved into the benefits of drug courts statewide.

He has offered his expertise to a new taskforce, which is keen to have a drug court up and running in Wollongong by 2015.

Dr Byrne yesterday rebuked claims the drug court was a "soft" form of punishment, noting the community needed to focus on eliminating crime rather than retribution.

"The drug court focuses on stopping crime from happening in the future," he explained.

"Jailing people doesn't stop them from returning to a life of crime; it just means for a period of time they can't offend; once they're released, the circumstances and environment that led them to that behaviour still exist.

"The drug court aims to give people the opportunity to learn skills and change their way of thinking with supervision and community support."

Data from several drug courts already operating statewide show the court's approach is effective for offenders motivated by a desperate need to feed their drug habit.

Treating the addiction not only improves the person's physical health, but also buoys their chances of gaining employment, education, housing and finance, Dr Byrne said.

He believes the community also wins as drug courts have already proven successful in reducing overall crime rates, damage from offences and the emotional cost to victims.

The taskforce, backing calls for a drug court in Wollongong, is now set to visit the drug court in Toronto, in the Hunter region.

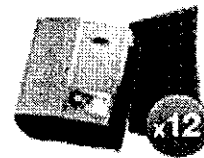
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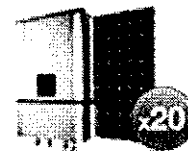


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