

MEDIA RELEASE

MAGISTRATES SUPPORT DRUG TREATMENT PROGRAM

RELEASE DATE: FRIDAY 2 APRIL 2004 EMBARGOED UNTIL 5 APRIL 2004

A survey of NSW magistrates has found that the Magistrates Early Referral into Treatment (MERIT) initiative receives a high level of judicial support and provides good outcomes for both offenders and the community.

MERIT is a voluntary program that aims to reduce drug-related crime by referring suitably motivated offenders with illicit drug problems into treatment. The survey, released today by the Judicial Commission of NSW, gauged the views of the magistracy on the operation and philosophy of the program.

Therapeutic jurisprudence, a unique partnership of justice and health, forms the basis of MERIT. As a relatively new addition to the operations of the Local Courts it could be expected that there would be some scepticism about the concept. However, nearly all respondents to the survey supported the concept of therapeutic jurisprudence.

Among other things the survey findings show that:

- the majority of respondents were highly satisfied with the MERIT program
- the overwhelming majority of respondents believed that participation in MERIT reduces the likelihood of an offender committing further offences or failing to appear before the court whilst on bail
- the majority of respondents thought that adherence to the MERIT treatment program ought to be a specific condition of bail, rather than a voluntary undertaking
- the majority of respondents thought that satisfactory completion of the MERIT treatment program had an impact on sentences imposed
- half the respondents believed they would benefit from further judicial education on the program
- approximately half of the respondents thought that there should be a limit on the number of times a defendant may be permitted to participate in MERIT
- most respondents believed that MERIT should be extended to include defendants with a primary alcohol problem.

Commenting on the survey's findings, the Chief Executive of the Judicial Commission of NSW, Mr Ernie Schmatt, said, "The survey results reveal that MERIT is a program that targets drug addiction and thereby benefits offenders, the courts and the community generally."

The MERIT Program is funded by the Australian Government and the NSW Government under the Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative of the Council of Australian Governments.

Further enquiries: Mr Ernie Schmatt 02 9299 4421

Mr Schmatt is available for media interviews on Friday afternoon for broadcast after 5.30 am on Monday morning.