



## **ILLICIT DRUG DIVERSION INITIATIVES & MERIT**

At the Council of Australian Governments special meeting on drugs in April 1999, all States and Territories agreed to a national approach to the diversion of drug offenders into treatment programs. The NSW Government, in support of this approach and in response to the NSW Drug Summit, committed to a range of initiatives to divert illicit drug users from the criminal justice system into drug treatment.

These initiatives were funded under the NSW Government Plan of Action and the National Illicit Drug Strategy, Illicit Drug Diversion Initiative. The Commonwealth and NSW Government entered into a funding agreement (the IDDI Funding Agreement). The Magistrates Early Referral Into Treatment (MERIT) Program was funded under this agreement and commenced on a pilot basis in Lismore and surrounding courts from July 2000.

MERIT aims to break the drug-crime cycle by supporting the early referral of defendants into treatment. A feature of MERIT, which distinguishes it from many other drug-crime diversion programs, is the fact that the defendant is not required to enter a plea of guilty in order to participate. Nor is there a requirement that a determination of guilt be made prior to entry into the program.

Since the formal evaluation and continuing success of the MERIT pilot in Lismore, the program has expanded across all 17 Area Health Services. It is now available at 52 Local Courts, which cover approximately 65% of the Local Court population.

In December 2003, the Australian and the NSW Government entered into a revised IDDI funding agreement. The Australian Government committed \$43 million to further strengthening the MERIT program over the next 3 and a half years. The availability of MERIT will continue to expand, with its implementation and outcomes being monitored and evaluated during this time.