The limited case for legal heroin

THE Government's working party on AIDS is one of many voices calling for liberalisation of the law relating to heroin and other drugs taken intravenously. A panel headed by the Liberal Senator Peter Baume has recommended that "possession of threshold amounts of drugs for personal use no longer be a cause for imprisonment". The panel has recommended uniform State laws to decriminalise the possession of drugs, including heroin, for personal use. It has also said the injection and possession of equipment for drug use should no longer be an offence.

The panel's recommendations need not be adopted by the committee preparing the White Paper on AIDS. Whatever the White Paper may say, it will be for the Government to decide finally what should be done. It would not be surprising if both the White Paper and the Government's final decision were different from the panel's recommendations.

Yet these recommendations will be considered against a background of growing willingness to consider all alternatives: For example, the NSW Bar Association called last month for "the cautious provision of heroin and other illicit drugs by specialist clinics on prescription in non-reusable packages for intravenous use by people who would otherwise use illegally". Under this proposal, drugs - including heroin, cocaine and amphetamines - would have to be taken at the clinics and could not be taken away. The association's president, Mr Ken Handley, QC, spoke of the need to "put some steel into the politicians' backbones". Others who have spoken in favour of liberalised laws in relation to these drugs include the former prime minister John Gorton, the leader of the Australian Democrats, Sen-

ator Haines, and Professor Ron Penny of the Australian National Council on AIDS. We have even heard Dr Robert Marks, a senior lecturer at the University of NSW's Australian Graduate School of Management, say that if Australia's opium poppy crop in Tasmania were applied to the manufacture not only of morphine but also heroin, and if that heroin were supplied under controlled conditions to addicts, the national deficit could be cut by perhaps $1 billion a year - the estimated amount now spent on illegally imported heroin.

While these voices favour bold action, comparatively few are heard against it. That does not mean that the many are right, but reflects the nature of the debates. Probably, most Australians recognise the many arguments in favor of liberalising heroin and other illegal drugs taken intravenously - that it will slow the spread of AIDS, reduce prison overcrowding, reduce crime based on trafficking and draw more addicts into rehabilitation programs.

But many people will still be wary and fear that these possible gains will be outweighed by new problems - especially more widespread use of the legal, and hence cheaper, drug. These risks clearly limit the case for legalisation. Even so, there is room for some action. Legal constraints limiting the success, for example, of needle-exchange programs in some States should be removed. Some treatment programs, if they are to develop, may require legislative action. But, however futile it may sound to the advocates of bold action, broad legislative action such as the legalisation of heroin and other so-called hard drugs is unlikely. That is because its feared disadvantages are still believed to outweigh its promised benefits.

British example

SIR: On the anniversary of Mrs Thatcher's 10th year in office, please let me offer a simple explanation for her ability to retain her lofty position - a lack ofcredible opposition.

A unified opposition devoid of continual internal "fighting" would have ousted Mrs Thatcher a long time ago.

For Thatcher read Hawke and you also have the reason to this Government's survival.

David Hibbett,
Eamore Road,
Newtown.

Who will pay?

SIR: Your juxtaposition of headlines - "Secret plan to fight abortion" and "Father pays scheme flops" (Herald, May 5) - is very telling. So, this furtive group of Federal

Contact Norah's Road, Manly, 2095.
Cooroora: A Victoria (known as 1950s) owned by Guaqy School of Information and History of the Local Society, Edmors or Mountains Grammar 110, Wentworth Hill.
Hoseman: John (nee Harper) in S York, Mary Ethel, Leocie, Muriel, Riel, sought. Contact Kinross Avenue, 2289.
Brown: Alexander (nee Harper) sawed in November, 1879 about Glasgow with the