

INTRODUCTION

'If we are to grapple with what is perhaps the most complicated area of all in contemporary social policy, it is important that professionals and policy makers constantly review the evidence for the effectiveness of their policies and programmes'.

Ruth, Viscountess Runciman

'Our starting point is that this is a very complex issue with no simple solutions. The Beckley view is that the best way to get under those complexities is to give people the space to debate them, out of the media spotlight and without the pressures of having to agree an official political position'.

Mike Trace

Amanda Neidpath welcomed delegates from five continents and over thirty countries to the fifth annual seminar organised by the Beckley Foundation in the series *Society and Drugs: A Rational Perspective*. She observed that there is much evidence that the War on Drugs has failed by its own criteria – drug use and drug markets continue to expand, as do the crime and health hazards associated with misuse and addiction. Against this background, the aim of the seminar was to bring together experts from a wide range of fields, to consider how best to manage 'a world awash with psychoactive substances'. Lady Neidpath argued that the desire to alter consciousness is an innate human drive, and thus attention needs to be directed towards the minimisation of associated harms, while respecting the individual's right to make choices that do not harm others.

Ruth, Viscountess Runciman, who chaired the morning session, noted that the Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme (BFDPP) was the first global initiative driven by the non-governmental sector that recognised the centrality of analysis of the evidence base to drafting effective drug policy development. On a personal note, she reflected on her experience of over 30 years as a member of the UK's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, in which capacity she had been involved in reports on AIDS and drug misuse in the 1980s, drug misusers and the criminal justice system in the 1990s, and drug laws and their enforcement in 2000. The work leading to all these reports faced a common problem: the frailty of the evidence, its dispersed nature, and the lack of analysis to bring together what was known. She concluded that, for all the deficits and problems of the current position, there was now movement beyond what she described as the "blank sheet position", adding that this owed much to the work of many of the international experts attending the seminar, and to initiatives, such as those of the Beckley Foundation, that were working to bring the evidence together.

Mike Trace, co-director of the BFDPP, stated that its primary aim was to create a space for discussion and analysis of drug policy. Its first activity had been to commission a series of reports and briefings that provided an overview and analysis of drug policy effectiveness around the world. The BFDPP's role was primarily to synthesise the available evidence and to present it in a clear and accessible way. Its primary function was not to provide answers and draw conclusions, but to inform and facilitate the debate on drug policy options, which could reach beyond a small group of experts and engage politicians, opinion formers, and a wider public.