

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

At the invitation of Dr. Andrew Jackson, I was delighted to organise and host the *Beckley/Foresight Seminar on Future Policy Challenges*, the aim of which was to review, and it is to be hoped, to augment the excellent *Drugs Futures 2025* a report compiled by the *Foresight Programme on Brain Sciences, Drugs and Addiction*. Only by attaining a rational overview of these complex issues, can we hope that better decisions for the future will be taken. Such a rational debate should help us to consider how psychoactive substances can successfully be managed to minimise their harm, while leaving the door open to science to explore their potential benefits for the individual and society.

Foresight has rightly recognised that the 21st century will be the century during which psychoactive substances, including cognition enhancers and recreational drugs, will become a fact of life, and will need to be managed wisely. Although the current UN drug strategy is to reduce and, ideally, to eliminate illicit drugs, the stark reality is that the global market has continued to expand, year by year. Moreover, there is an increasing blurring of boundaries between categories of drugs, from medicinal agents to recreational substances.

Dr Andrew Jackson from the Foresight Programme introduced the day, noting that the current regulatory system does not match with scientific understanding of drug harms. He suggested that in future the use of drugs might become more sophisticated, and new developments could bring benefits, such as more effective treatments for drug misuse. However, he stressed the importance of vigilance over potential harms arising from the use of new drugs and their combinations.

Professor David Nutt from the University of Bristol emphasised the increasing understanding of the brain mechanisms involved in drug use and dependency. This has already led to new agents, with novel neuronal targets, which raise the possibility of more sophisticated treatments for harmful drug use. Future regulation will impact on the use of such agents, and of other novel categories of drugs such as cognition enhancers. Perhaps regulation will move towards a more person-centred approach, with less emphasis on prohibition, but this raises issues concerning societal perceptions of drug use and international conventions.

In a review of harm reduction, *Professor Gerry Stimson* from the International Harm Reduction Association highlighted some of the drivers of change in the way society uses drugs, including genomics and the potential to determine individual susceptibility to certain drug use. Such changes would impact on education and regulation, as well as raising issues of personal privacy. Although current regulations may be considered inadequate, Prof Stimson stressed the importance of a regulatory framework to control and develop new agents.

Professor Peter Reuter of the University of Maryland emphasised the importance of considering drug use in a social context as being subject to various influences.

Discussions on harm need to consider the total harm of drug use and of policies, including regulation, that are instituted to manage this.

Professor Robert MacCoun of the University of California addressed the question of why people use drugs. He stressed that any policy analysis should take account of the benefits that individuals experienced from drug use as well as the costs. However, taking account of subjective benefits can be problematic, and objections exist against doing so. Nevertheless, research to address the reasons why people take drugs is important as, for example, it could impact beneficially on drug prevention efforts.

One difficulty in the implementation of drug policies is gauging their effectiveness. *Professor Mark Kleiman* of the University of California raised concerns with the methodology used in evaluating new policies and treatment programmes, particularly where the prevalence of drug use among the general household population was used as an indicator of success. It was suggested that the homeless and those in prison would make better target populations for such evaluation studies, as these groups have a high risk of substance abuse.

Developments in our knowledge of neuroscience are having an impact on our understanding of learning and memory, according to *Professor Trevor Robbins* from the University of Cambridge. These efforts will continue to produce agents that can improve cognition in patients with disorders such as dementia, schizophrenia and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder. Drugs already available and those in development have also shown promise to enhance aspects of cognition in healthy individuals. However, individual cognitive enhancement is affected by numerous factors, and may have both positive and negative trade-offs.

Professor Barbara Sahakian of the University of Cambridge argued that while such agents could bring great benefits for patients, their use in healthy people raised ethical issues for individuals and for the whole of society. Such ethical issues are also raised by other new developments, including knowledge of genetic information and vaccination against drugs, as noted by *Dr Harold Schmidt* of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics.

In conclusion, *Professor Colin Blakemore* of the Medical Research Council called for a new, more flexible system of drug regulation, to take account of developments in scientific understanding. *Professor Charles Shuster* from the Wayne School of Medicine noted that policy is dependent on how the issue of drug use is conceptualised, with a wholly moralistic viewpoint precluding the rational application of evidence on such issues as minimising the harms of drug use. Such concerns were also inhibiting scientific research seeking to determine the possible benefits of recreational drug use, involving specifically cannabis and psychedelics. It can be argued that there is a biological disposition to drug use, and that human beings may have an innate urge to alter consciousness. The best that society can therefore do is to learn to manage the harms associated with drug use, while respecting the individual's freedom to make choices that do not harm others.

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