

HARM REDUCTION AND THE WIDER SOCIAL CONTEXT

SOCIAL, ETHICAL AND REGULATORY IMPLICATIONS

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DISCUSSANT

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND, USA.

Prof Gerry Stimson was another of the project's science advisers. In his presentation, he praised the Foresight for its combination of vision, rigour and creativity, and the ability to freely discuss potential issues within the work of possible futures. He added that scientists are often poor at futures work and it would be worthwhile to have futures training more widely available to academics and others.

CHANGING PATTERNS OF DRUG USE

He pointed to drivers for change in the way society uses drugs, which include:

- Informatics – we might all have our genome information or medical history on an embedded chip, which could change the way in which healthcare providers interact with patients.
- New drugs, including cognition enhancers, and types of drugs and other technologies to alter experience not yet envisioned, such as transcranial magnetic stimulation. A new sensory industry may emerge that combines pharmaceuticals and brain technologies with audio-visual media.
- Social change, such as the ageing population, producing more drug-experienced older people.
- Increased access to drugs through the internet.
- The performance culture, leading to use of cognition enhancers, and how this will relate to issues such as drug testing.
- The increased feasibility of home drug production. However, continuing geopolitical instability will mean the ongoing availability of plant-based drugs.

These pressures mean a need for better models of drug harm and use. There have already been steep increases in drug use, with opiate-related deaths increasing roughly 100-fold between 1968 and 2000, accompanied by large increases in the prevalence of

drug use. If we have a large drug economy in 2025, this will involve substantial harms, particularly to health and also the impact of a large illicit economy. Potentially, there could be 1 million problem drug users in the UK by this date.

NEW APPROACHES TO ADDICTION AND CONTROLLING DRUG USE

Prof Stimson pointed to other future challenges including vaccination against addiction, which will not offer lifelong protection from childhood, but will instead offer time-out to addicts. This may create some unusual and unintended consequences, allowing people to more easily cycle both in and out of drug use. In addition, he suggested that pharmacogenomic knowledge of our own drug susceptibility could impact on drug education and regulation, and he asked if blanket regulations would be unnecessary if the susceptible few could be identified.

He pointed out that current regulations are a mishmash, begging the question of how and why would the government regulate a drug that is not used as a medicine, is used for pleasure or enhancement, has few side effects and no addiction potential? In response to questions, he noted that new technologies, such as understanding the genomics of addiction, would allow earlier intervention to minimise harms but could also invade personal privacy, again raising issues of the infringements of rights of individuals and of society with such technologies. He emphasised the importance of regulatory frameworks, not only to control use, but potentially to allow certain agents to be developed.

HOW HARM AND DRUG REGULATION INTERACTION

Joining the discussion, Prof Peter Reuter told the seminar that the Foresight report was valuable because it allowed policy to be seen in a social context and paid attention to the role of norms in determining harms rather than simply the effects of the drug itself, which is the thinking in the US. But it has the disadvantage of regarding regulatory structures as endogenous, without the context of the political economy and legal framework. He also pointed out that this report addresses issues that are simply taboo in the US and how impressed he was between the differences of what is possible in the US and the UK.

Reuter suggested that the report did not emphasise sufficiently our inability to predict the future, and he pointed out that drug markets are often very conservative and that access is a prime driver of misuse. However, other pressures exist on regulatory frameworks. For example, the issue of alcohol drinking hours had been reframed, so 24-hour drinking was a response given to mitigate a particular harm of drunken people leaving drinking establishments. Such pressures on the regulatory frameworks may fly in the face of scientific evidence, as in this case alcohol use and its industry were reframed as good for employment and were encouraged. He also made the point that, in the US, litigation rather than regulation was the eventual means by which tobacco advertising became restricted.

Reuter noted that harm reduction shares the issue of structural influences, although these are moral rather than economic with illicit drugs. He pointed out that harm

reduction focuses on harmfulness but must account for total harm, which is a consequence of the extent of use, and the average harm associated with use, further broken down into the number of people who use, how frequently they use, and the harmfulness per incident of use. Further, harmfulness can be manipulated in various ways, and trade-offs can occur with different measures. In some cases increasing access to substances can be beneficial, such as opening stores out of normal hours for homeless alcoholics to prevent them from drinking more dangerous substances.

Prof Reuter asked how large an illicit market would be acceptable compared with deaths prevented if tobacco was made illegal. With cognition enhancers, the key harm raised was the potential harm of creating a society where people would need to take such substances to stay level with the rest of the group. He suggested that there was no definite way to predict the long-term consequences in terms of intensity and length of use etc. with any new product.

KEY POINTS

There will be new regulatory and ethical challenges in the future with increasing drug use, drug availability, awareness, education and increasing self-sovereignty.

The development of novel drugs and technologies, particularly when combined, will have novel implications, such as the creation of new sensory industries.

The political economy and the legal framework are important as exogenous pressures for regulatory change, whereas moral objection is important as a pressure for regulatory stasis.