

## ARTICLE IN *THE LANCET* 2007: 369, 1047-1053,

### DEVELOPMENT OF A RATIONAL SCALE TO ASSESS THE HARM OF DRUGS OF POTENTIAL MISUSE

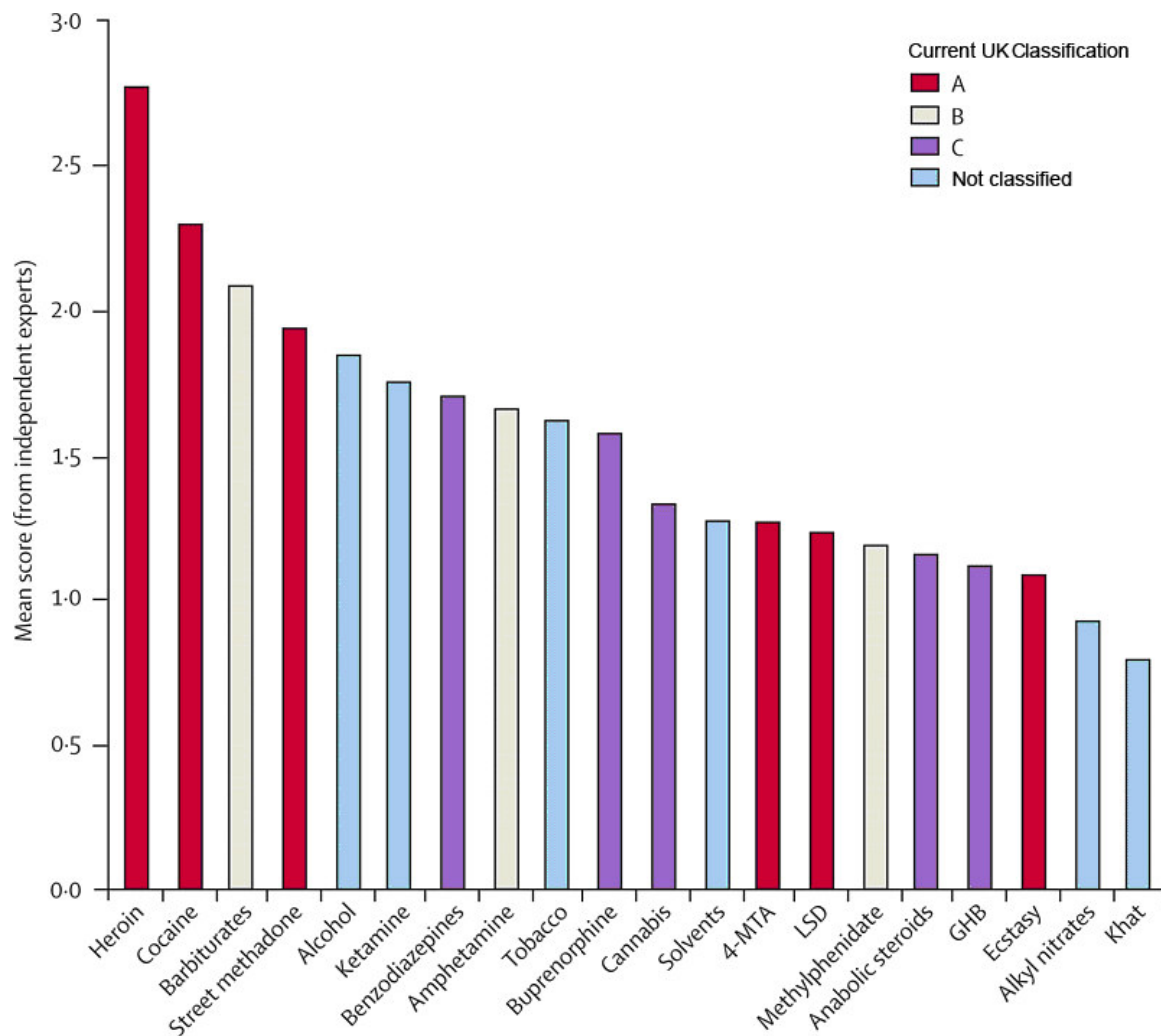
A particularly important outcome of the Beckley Foundation seminar series was its role in the development of the seminal article in *The Lancet* outlining an evidence-based alternative to the thoroughly unsatisfactory classification system in the UK.

A recurring theme of the Beckley Foundation seminars has been highlighting the haphazard and inflexible nature of the current classification system for illegal drugs, which often bears little relationship to the real harms of the different substances, and omits any comparison with legal and prescribed drugs which can be even more dangerous to their users and more costly to society. Indeed, as the Government's own Science and Technology Committee's report, '*Drug Classification: making a hash of it*' concludes:

"The classification system, purports to rank drugs on the basis of harm associated with their misuse, but we have found glaring anomalies in the classification system as it stands and a wide consensus that the current system is not fit for purpose...The problems we have identified highlight the fact that the promised review of the classification system is much needed and we urge the Government to proceed with the consultation without delay. We have proposed that the Government should develop a more scientifically based scale of harm, decoupled from penalties for possession and trafficking. In addition, we have argued that there is an urgent need for greater investment in research to underpin policy development in this area."

The *Lancet* article has its roots in the talks given by Professor Colin Blakemore at two of the Beckley Foundation seminars: *An Interdisciplinary Perspective on Alcohol and Other Recreational Drugs*, held at Admiralty Arch, in collaboration with the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, in 2003, and the *Global Drugs Policy Seminar* at the House of Lords in 2004.

This influential paper put forward a new scale of drug-related harms based upon the comparative classification of twenty substances. The paper, co-authored by Prof. Colin Blakemore and Prof. David Nutt, *et al.*, presents a scale of harms based on three scales – physical harm, dependence and social harm - which were independently assessed by two groups of experts from the fields of chemistry, pharmacology, forensic science, psychiatry and other medical specialties. The results, as shown below, are that the new scale of harm is quite inconsistent with the ABC drug classification system currently in use in the UK.



The Graph shows the overall mean scores of the independent expert groups, averaged across all scorers, plotted in rank order for all 20 substances. The classification of each substance under the Misuse of Drugs Act is also shown. Although the two substances with the highest harm ratings (heroin and cocaine) are class A drugs, overall there was a surprisingly poor correlation between the drugs' class, according to the Misuse of Drugs Act, and the harm score. This discrepancy is highlighted by the fact that amongst both the eight most dangerous and the eight least dangerous drugs, three are rated as Class A and two are unclassified. Alcohol, ketamine, tobacco, and solvents (all unclassified at the time of assessment) were ranked as more harmful than LSD, ecstasy, and its variant 4-MTA (all currently class A drugs).

This system of classification, based on the scoring of harms by experts, on the basis of scientific evidence, has much to commend it and has long been recommended by the Beckley Foundation. This approach provides a comprehensive and transparent process for the assessment of the danger of drugs. The system is rigorous and involves a formal, quantitative assessment of several aspects of harm. It can easily be updated as knowledge advances. This system could therefore be usefully developed to provide an evidence-based approach to drug classification. The new scale and the methods employed in its development offers a systematic framework and process that could be used to aid in decision-making by regulatory bodies.