



Interview with Amanda Feilding, Lady Neidpath, Founder and Director of the Beckley Foundation

Interviewed by Dr David Luke

Introduction

Following the recent publication of a highly influential article in the *Lancet* on the relative scale of harms of 20 common psychoactive drugs, the BBC's Horizon aired a television programme, 'Is ecstasy safer than alcohol?', exploring the paper's research findings. As part of that programme, Amanda Feilding, the Director of the Beckley Foundation, was interviewed about her organisation and the part it played in this important scientific contribution to the current drug policy debate.

Can you tell me about the Beckley Foundation and the work you do?

The Beckley Foundation investigates consciousness and its changing states. It promotes world-class research into the science, health, politics and history of practices used to alter consciousness, from meditation to psychoactive substances. This leads it to have an interest in drug policy and how we can better manage the reality of a world awash in psychoactive drugs, in order to minimise the harms to individuals and society. It has three programmes:

- the *science programme* was set up to investigate the physiological and neural correlates underlying consciousness and its altered states, and the ways in which substances or practices benefit or harm well-being
- the *drug policy programme* aims to widen the debate on drugs policy and to help guide it towards a more rational, evidenced-based and effective approach

- the *seminar programme* brings together key representatives from the fields of neuroscience, health, education, law enforcement and policymaking to discuss current and future drug policy in a neutral environment.

Apart from organising international drug policy seminars, and publishing the proceedings of these high-level meetings, the Foundation has produced over 30 much-cited reports and briefing papers on key topics in drug policy. Beckley has also founded two independent bodies, the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy (www.issdp.org), which provides a forum for influential academics from around the world to collaborate in evaluating the effectiveness of different drug policies, and the International Drug Policy Consortium (www.idpc.info), which provides a platform for non-governmental organisations and professional networks to assist policymakers in making better-informed decisions.

The recent *Lancet* drug classification article, by Nutt *et al* (www.beckleyfoundation.org/bib/doc/bf/2007_David_211305_1.pdf), which caused considerable discussion when it was published in March 2007, was born out of discussions at Beckley Park and was first presented at two of the Beckley Foundation drugs policy seminars. The Beckley seminars, which started in 2002, led the policy debate towards a new, scientific perspective on drugs, which has now become the norm, as exemplified by the Foresight project and the RSA report (www.beckleyfoundation.org/bib/doc/bf/2007_RSA_211299_1.pdf). The old clichés no longer dominate, such as the oversimplified polarisation between prohibition and legalisation, and the discussion is now more about how best to regulate and control the use of psychoactive substances, with minimum harm to the individual and society.

The recent *Lancet* article indicated that there appears to be absolutely no relationship between the government's current drug classification system and the position that particular drugs, both legal and illegal, occupy on a combined 'scale of harms'. What do you think are the benefits that the Nutt *et al* paper can bring?

It can bring a more scientifically based rational approach to the classification of psychoactive substances, which has always been the aim of the Beckley Foundation, and which the present ABC categories lack. For instance, the ABC system does not include the two major killers among psychoactive substances, tobacco and alcohol. Tobacco and alcohol together account for about 90% of drug-related deaths in the UK. I think the *Lancet* paper will be a very influential document, coming from some of the leading scientific experts in the country, because it provides a framework that is open to amendment according to changes in our knowledge about the harms of specific drugs.

Of course, to have a full picture one must also take into account those effects of the drugs that people find beneficial. An effective regulatory system needs to be based on a scale of both harms and benefits. It is important to remember that of the millions who use psychoactive substances in the world only a very small proportion become problem users. That is, only a small proportion of people who use drugs (between 8–12%) misuse them, and these misusers are responsible for the vast majority of the problems. Home Office statistics estimate that 99% of drug costs are due to the problem users.

Sadly, in drug policy there is very little evaluation. No other area of governmental policy would continue spending such enormous sums of money without having a due process of evaluation. We need to face the fact that the present system, which has been running for over 40 years, is just not effective. We need to re-examine this complex problem, free from preconceived ideas and political agendas, and work out strategies that are most likely to be effective in lowering harms.

How much of the current classification system is based on science?

Very little. The present system is largely based on cultural and historical factors, which have taken precedence over the science. It is archaic and rigid. As an example, it has taken over 35 years to move the classification of cannabis from Class B to Class C, and now in the face of all the scientific evidence, the government is moving it back to Class B again. The system's scientific inaccuracy undermines health education messages. For instance, by putting ecstasy and LSD, two non-addictive substances, in the same category as heroin and crack cocaine, it sends out the wrong message about the relative harms of these substances. Moreover, it is particularly misguided when fear of 'sending the wrong message' is used as a justification for not considering evidence-based revisions of the present system.

In the UK, the government's own advisory boards, such as the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, and the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, have recently advised the government that the current regulatory system needs re-structuring based upon a rational, evidenced-based approach. The House of Commons Science and Technology Committee recently concluded that the current system '*... is not fit for purpose*'.

Your views on the current system – does it work?

No, patently not. Much too large a percentage of money is being spent on drug enforcement strategies, with little evidence of providing any positive benefit. In 2005, a government report acknowledged that measures to disrupt supply of drugs to the country have failed. The current system also has the effect of criminalising the youth when their only crime has been engaging in an activity that harms no one but themselves, and is something that they do not even recognise as a crime.

So is it time for a change?

Yes. The current system is inadequate and ill-conceived. Drug use and drug-related crime is escalating as more and more people are put in prison, and yet drugs are becoming cheaper, purer and more available. Currently, around nine million people are in prison for drug-related offences worldwide, about 500,000 in prison in the US, and around 13,000 of the prison population of 80,000 in the UK. The cost of incarceration in the US alone in the 1990s was around \$6.6 billion per annum, and the cost of keeping a person in prison is more than room, board and tuition at Harvard. This is certainly the time to address the failures of the war on drugs and to implement a more rational approach to regulation, whereby it is recognised that *misuse*, not drug *use per se*, is the main problem.

The Beckley Foundation recently published its *Global Cannabis Commission Report*, which highlighted how many of the harms associated with cannabis use are the result of prohibition itself, particularly the social harms arising from arrest and imprisonment. It therefore recommended that, in order to minimise the harms, cannabis use should be decriminalised and the international conventions that determine drug policies should be reformed to allow countries greater autonomy in setting policies that better reflect their own individual circumstances.

Does prohibition and zero tolerance work?

Prohibition and zero tolerance has some short-term effect when, as in Thailand, they shoot suspected dealers on sight. But otherwise, as in the US, it fills the prisons and has very little beneficial effect. Zero tolerance policies do little to reduce drug-misuse harms, and do nothing to reduce demand. They are also costly to implement, both financially and in terms of civil liberties.

Zero tolerance strategies push up the price for drugs, which means more money for organised crime, greater incentive for dealers to cut their product with cheap fillers, and more acquisitive crime as dependent users struggle to meet higher costs. Prohibition has not demonstrated itself as a successful means of reducing levels of use and harm, even by the UN's own yardsticks, as it is generally accepted that most drug problems are increasing yearly. Furthermore, it puts vast sums of money into the hands of criminals.

Is there any point in trying to stop people taking drugs?

Yes, but the reality is that many people will take them regardless, and therefore society must think how best

to deal with that situation, where the vast majority of those drug users will cause no problems to themselves or society and, on the whole, will stop automatically in their 30s. Surely it's a mistake to criminalise them if they cause no damage? The resources would be better spent in education, treatment and other harm-reduction measures.

If society wishes to cut the overall cost of drug-taking, it should focus on problematic drug *misuse*, rather than *use per se*, and improve drug education and access to voluntary treatment programmes. New vaccines are being developed for the treatment of drug addictions, which may in time be helpful in reducing both drug demand and drug-related health and crime problems. Evaluations of drug policy successes show that harm reduction approaches deliver the greater benefit for the money spent.

Do you think we have the right attitude towards drugs in the UK?

Not really. We don't approach their use rationally. Most people have an innate desire to alter their consciousness, whether through alcohol, illegal drugs or other means. Society needs to get a more balanced, better-educated approach, so that we try to manage the use of psychoactive substances in a way that minimises their harms. The word 'drug' itself carries much negative connotation, whilst not encapsulating the different harms and benefits of the different substances. This does not help a rational approach to the problem.

Why do you think the UK has the biggest 'drug problem' in Europe?

I don't really know. However, since I've been involved in drug policy I have noticed how our politicians do not want to touch the subject, as it is not considered to be good for their careers. Evidence indicates that we must grapple with the whole issue at a root level by approaching how to control and regulate these substances in new ways. Compare the UK situation to that of Holland, say, which over the last 30 years has spent much more time and effort in trying to work out the problems pragmatically, and consequently has a much more rational approach to drugs, proportionally much lower rates of problem drug use, and fewer drug-related deaths than the UK.

Which countries do you think are most successful with their approach to drugs?

Some European countries like Spain, Portugal and Holland have a more balanced approach. In Holland,

there is *de facto* decriminalisation where the law on the books is not enforced with regard to possession of cannabis, and supply of small amounts in certain licensed places, and they have much better outcomes, as mentioned above. Certainly the US position, with over half-a-million drug-related offenders in prison, is untenable. It also causes enormous problems in drug-producing and transit countries by enriching international drug cartels, fuelling narcoviolence, and bringing about widespread suffering through the destabilisation of entire political systems and the violation of human rights.

Can you tell me a little more about the Beckley Foundation's scientific programme?

The Beckley Foundation specialises in those areas of research to do with consciousness and its altered states, which no one explores, as either they are taboo or there is no funding, usually both. Research on certain controlled substances is completely taboo. The Beckley Foundation has a keen interest in investigating the neural and physiological correlates of altered states of consciousness, such as those brought about through meditation, cannabis, and the psychedelics. This research will help us better to understand the dangers and potential benefits of these substances and techniques, and to elucidate why people use them. We are currently researching psilocybin-aided psychotherapy as a means of treating otherwise untreatable addiction, and the anxiolytic potential of cannabidiol, a substance found in cannabis. The Beckley Foundation has also initiated the first fully-approved investigation into LSD with human subjects in over 30 years. This study is investigating dose-related changes in consciousness and changes in synchronicity and other facets of neural activity, together with research into how LSD might potentiate creativity. Another exciting project that the Beckley Foundation is involved in, in collaboration with a Russian pioneer of cerebral circulation, is researching the changing measures of cranial compliance and cerebral fluid dynamics, and their role in age-related changes in cognition and health. We are further investigating ways in which we can counteract the diminution of cranial compliance that accompanies the ageing process.

How much is scientific research affected by politics?

Very much. It is not illegal to do research on the psychedelics, but it is almost impossible to get

ethical approval. Indeed, leading scientists who would be in favour of doing such research feel that there is no point in even approaching the ethical boards at this time. But this situation is changing. The UK has been particularly bad in this area, but hopefully this is changing. Surprisingly, the US is more advanced, and it is there that in 2007 we got permission to conduct the first LSD research with human participants, since prohibition brought all such research to a close.

What about the argument that money is better spent on research into 'real' problems such as cancer or diabetes?

Obviously, spending money on problems like cancer and diabetes is extremely important, but the cost of the drug problem worldwide is hundreds of billions of dollars and it causes immense human suffering, so we urgently need to spend money researching how these substances work, and to improve our policies in dealing with them. The UK government estimates the social cost of drug use at about £20 billion a year in 2004. Investing more money in treatment can reduce costs. Every £1 spent on drug treatment saves between £9 and £18 on the subsequent costs of problem drug use, particularly drug-related crime. However, more research into the physiological underpinnings of the different drugs, and into the development of new treatments is essential.

Is there a solution to the drug problem in this country?

What is needed is a more rational, scientific approach to society's great appetite for psychoactive substances, which shows no signs of abating. A new system of control based on a scientific scale of harm would seem a more rational way to begin to implement this. There is probably no simple clear solution, but one thing is clear, moving towards 2009, when the UN evaluates its 10-year strategy to reduce drug use and drug-related crime: drugs have never been cheaper, purer or more available, and this trend is increasing year-on-year. Clearly the war on drugs has failed and a new approach is called for. We hope our recent report *Cannabis Policy: Moving beyond stalemate*, authored by the world's leading authorities, will help initiate a more effective approach to the regulation of cannabis.

For more information on the Beckley Foundation go to www.beckleyfoundation.org.