

BECKLEY FOUNDATION REPORT

CANNABIS: GOING AGAINST CONVENTIONS

With the government due to reclassify cannabis again shortly, the Beckley Foundation Report is a timely reminder that drug control and the regulations governing it have global, not just national, implications.

The Beckley Foundation has produced a considered report looking in detail at the conventions on the global control of drugs. They find that the conventions can no longer be said to be achieving their core aim of reducing the market for controlled drugs and, by the limits they place on the countries signed up, they may, inadvertently, be causing more harm than good.

The report looks in detail at the health and social harms caused by cannabis use. Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit drug, whose dangers from a public health perspective are 'moderate' in comparison with alcohol and tobacco. However, it is vital to look at the entire picture.

As the 'war on drugs' has made it harder to import cannabis across the Gibraltar Straits from Morocco to southern Spain, so cannabis production has been displaced from being grown naturally in the fields of Morocco to being grown hydroponically in so-called "cannabis houses" all over the UK.

Not only are there issues of safety for those working in the house but also those living nearby are unaware of the dangers (the use of the lamps and often illegally sourced electricity supply puts these houses at greater risk of fire), and there are concerns too that the cannabis grown in this intensive way contains higher concentrations of THC (12 to 18 per cent) compared with Moroccan cannabis (five to seven per cent). The Beckley report is right to call for more research to establish the facts on cannabis and mental illness.

Other health harms are connected to cannabis use. Those who drive whilst intoxicated increase the risk of traffic accidents; there is an increased risk of respiratory illness from smoking the drug; and there is a risk of physical dependence in around 10 per cent of users.

Some of the greatest harm caused by involvement with cannabis can be for those young people who are caught in possession of the drug. This can cause long-term damage to their education and career prospects; as such, convictions must be declared at almost every step of the education and career ladder. A conviction can also cause problems for people seeking visas to visit countries like the USA. I would

urge the government to consider these implications if they want to persist in their drive to reclassify cannabis.

As global enforcement procedures have failed to reduce cannabis usage and associated harms, the report recommends that individual states be allowed greater autonomy in setting cannabis policies that better reflect their individual circumstances. Regimes such as in Holland would be able to operate properly without the paradoxes that currently undermine it, and states would be able to undertake their own harm reduction education programmes. This would be particularly useful with regard to controlling cannabis potency.

The Beckley report, authored as it is by so many eminent scientists, is a useful weapon in the armoury of those who seek to ensure that drug policy, both national and global has a scientific evidence base. However, as the government seeks to discount the advice of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) and others on cannabis reclassification, I do begin to wonder whether there is a future for sensible scientific drug policy.

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