PREFACE

Evidence suggests that mankind has used psychoactive substances since pre-history, and that these may have played a significant role in the evolution of human culture. We are now facing a world with unprecedented levels and choices of psychoactive agents, used to modify perception, sensation, mood and behaviour. The numerous psychotropic agents available in the modern world include recreational substances such as tobacco and alcohol, and psychedelic substances, some of which have been used for millennia by traditional societies for healing and spiritual purposes. Furthermore, the past 50 years has seen an explosion of scientific knowledge of brain function, including neurochemistry, and this has been paralleled by the development of pharmaceutical agents to treat neurological and psychiatric disorders. The 21st century is already being hailed as the century of neuroscience.

Worldwide, psychoactive substance use among the public is becoming more complex, with the increased availability of pharmaceuticals, recreational drugs, and herbal psychotropics, while knowledge of the action and effects of such substances is increasingly sophisticated. Nowadays, the boundaries between different types of drug, and of usage - such as recreational, therapeutic or enhancing - are becoming increasingly blurred. The development of new agents will undoubtedly continue to occur, as will new combinations of drugs with novel effects, some of which may cause new problems.

Use of such substances undoubtedly does and will impact on the well-being of both individuals and societies, and it is vital to bring scientific evidence to bear to alleviate associated adverse consequences, such as toxicity, dependency and crime. In general, the approaches that have been taken over the last 30-40 years to control the use of non-prescription drugs, to classify and to regulate them, have not been successful. Moreover, pharmaceutical agents, including putative cognition enhancers, are now widely available to the public via the internet, in some cases bypassing healthcare systems.

In regard to the management of recreational drug use, the impact of law enforcement, and of other measures to reduce supply, remain uncertain. There is little evidence that supply-side measures are containing the level of harmful drug use. It seems imperative, therefore, to explore the potential efficacy of improved regulatory measures that would lie between prohibition and legalisation. Changes in the criminal justice system, such as drug courts, seem likely to be more helpful than mass incarceration. Other approaches that minimise the harms associated with some recreational drug usage, such as needle exchange, are evidence-based, and thus it is important that ideology does not stand in the way of implementation of proven harm-reduction measures.

Illegal drug production is a key issue affecting a small number of underdeveloped countries, and global policies for the control of substances such as coca and opium have enormous impact upon civic culture and stability in these nations. The increase in crime brought about by legal drugs, such as alcohol, as well as by illegal drugs, is increasingly being recognised throughout the world, and rational responses are needed to tackle this substantial public-health and social problem. In order to guide policy, it is important that

an understanding is developed both of the total harms caused by particular drugs to individuals and society, and also of the subjective benefits and other reasons why people take particular substances. A distinction needs to be drawn between responsible *use* of substances, and their imprudent *misuse;* and the factors which cause a small percentage of individuals to misuse, with major adverse consequences for public order, need to be elucidated.

There is growing anecdotal evidence that some drugs that are currently illegal may have beneficial therapeutic uses in the treatment of a range of medical conditions. However, international drug control systems restrict research into the potential benefits of these substances, in particular cannabis and psychedelic agents. These latter substances may also have an important role to play in the investigation of cognitive and sensory processing, and of other aspects of human consciousness.

Advances in the science of learning and memory are already revealing the potential for enhancement of faculties in healthy individuals. If drugs for enhancement of various aspects of consciousness become a mainstream reality, it would be helpful to anticipate and debate various aspects of their usage. How will or should such agents be sanctioned, regulated and accessed? If only those individuals who can afford to pay for these agents can access them, will this further exacerbate socio-economic divisions within societies and throughout the world? Will such drug usage increase competitiveness in an already competitive society? Could a pill that enhances compassion undermine our respect for such a characteristic?

In attempting to address these issues, the Beckley Foundation continues to emphasise the importance of rationality in any discussion. As Professor Colin Blakemore, Chief Executive of the Medical Research Council, pointed out, in order to move the debate on and to make useful recommendations for the future, we need to detach ourselves from ideological considerations and to look dispassionately at the factual evidence. Only by attaining a rational overview of these complex issues can we ensure that the right decisions for the future will be taken. Such a scientific debate will help us to reconsider how psychoactive substances can best be managed to minimise their harms, while respecting individual freedoms to make choices that do not harm others.

Amanda Neidpath