

INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW

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This is the first Beckley seminar with an international focus, and it is rewarding to see such a gathering with an interest and hunger for debate in these complex issues. By way of an introduction to the Beckley Foundation, it was set up to look at the science, particularly the neuroscience, behind the modulation of consciousness and the use of psychoactive substances. A particular concern is the invisible barrier blocking objective scientific research in the area of controlled substances. Most would expect there to be a certain level of understanding of the brain chemistry of illegal drugs, but there have been numerous barriers to approval and funding of research and publication of results in this area. The Beckley Foundation provides an independent channel of funds, and supports and directs scientific research, in order to further our understanding of the effects of these substances on the human brain and behaviour. How important is this scientific base to policy formation? Understanding the science and properties of different drugs is certainly crucial to deciding their relative harms which has been, and will continue to be, instrumental in the discussion about how best to control and regulate them.

Research also helps us in terms of understanding new challenges. The policy world is slow to understand the fashion, culture and socio-economics behind drug use. One trend we have had to face recently was the increase in use of synthetic drugs over the last ten years. Policy makers are used to cultivated substances, which are grown, synthesised, transported and used somewhere else. They have had to rethink paradigms in view of these changes. The *Foresight Project* is trying to make judgements of what is going to happen in the next 10-20 years. It is likely that the pattern of drug use and type of stimulation in the future will be different to that which exists now. How does policy keep up with these major changes?

The *Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme* is an initiative that seeks to develop research in policy analysis and promote an evaluation of drug policy that is as scientific as possible. There have been debates over the years: legalisation *versus* prohibition; crackdown on *versus* support of addicts; zero tolerance *versus* harm reduction. When we get to the highest political levels where decisions are actually taken, diplomatic and ideological considerations take precedence over the evidence base of what actually works. Research has not developed as well as would have been expected in such a major area of social policy. Over the last 40 years, one would have hoped that there would be clearer signposts, but the evidence base remains extremely sparse. Development of that evidence base should help better decision-making in the future.

It proves difficult to acknowledge in public and political settings that the system now in operation to reduce the scale of illicit drug use, and the harms that flow from it, does not work. We have tried very hard to reduce the scale of the market. If we look at the statistics, it is incontrovertible that the market has increased dramatically over the last 40 years. We need to do something different if we aim to make improvements in the future.

The possibilities are to 1) *Carry on with current approaches*. There are some slight signs that current policy could succeed in certain areas, e.g. significant and sustained reduction of opium cultivation in the golden triangle (but accompanied by an alarming increase in methamphetamine production in the same area). 2) *Strengthen current approaches*. It is a plausible argument that we have tried to stifle local and international markets, but that the actions may just not be clear enough, or strong enough. 3) *Alter the focus in order to reduce harms rather than trying to eradicate the market*. 4) *Acknowledge that the current system is fundamentally flawed*- and needs a total overhaul, so that a regulated market of these substances is introduced.

There are good arguments for and against each possibility, but it is counterproductive to put all our energies into proving that the current approach works and trying to justify it. The evidence base is not as developed as one would like, but we have some signposts to what is effective. If any other area of policy had been so ineffective in terms of its primary objective for 40 years, it is inconceivable that government would not have drastically reviewed the process. In drug policy, we spend too much time trying to pretend we are on track towards our stated aims.

National governments, the EU and the UN are the right bodies to map out future directions in these areas. The non-governmental sector has a role to play as 'critical friend' to government. It should offer constructive help rather than a barrage of criticism. This is a very difficult tightrope to walk, and it is easy to fall off. The NGO sector is not part of government and therefore is not constrained by political process, but it does understand pressures on policy makers. One of the most frustrating things for those working in government is the tension between NGOs and policy makers: they currently have no way of communicating in a meaningful and positive way. The *Beckley Reports* offer suggestions to authorities on how a proper objective review and evaluation could be conducted.

I can understand why the drug policy issue brings out the risk-averse nature of politicians. Asking people with democratic accountability to show weakness, admit that things are not going well, is difficult, and the golden rule in modern democratic politics is *never admit things are going wrong*. In drug policy, we are asking people to admit that what we are doing is mistaken, and that we need to think again. We are also asking decision-makers to take positions that may appear 'soft' to the media and general public. This is ironic, as one could consider that doing nothing about the escalating increase in harms was the true 'soft' position.

We are trying to sell a very complex solution, and whatever is proposed will only ever be a partial solution. There is no structure of drug policy that fits every circumstance and there is unlikely to be one that fully solves the problem of drug-related deaths, drug addiction or drug-related crime. So all you can offer to a politician is a solution that it is very complicated which might allow some steps forward. That is not great rhetoric with which to enter an election. All of this is counterintuitive if you have a political mind. We cannot change the fact that we have sooner or later to admit to a lack of progress. It is also important to consider that the media deal with the drugs issue in a particular way, which in turn affects the public's attitudes. The response to all these difficulties should not be to give up, but to improve the evidence base and to give a better understanding of which policies can improve outcomes.