

HOW CAN WE TRANSLATE SCIENCE INTO POLICY AND ACTION

MICHAEL FARRELL

Consultant Psychiatrist, National Addiction Centre

There has been a trend towards increased drug use over the last ten years. Making the link between science and policy is a major challenge, yet necessary to provide a better understanding of the effects on society. A core understanding of the social and biological sciences assists in pursuing an informed and coherent drugs policy. Understanding the differing properties of the various drugs available can highlight the necessity to have different policies for different drugs. Also, understanding some of the core scientific findings behind the biological mechanisms underlying dependence can assist in planning responses and therapies.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse in the US has promoted the concept of “addiction as a disease of the brain”, arguing that such an approach can improve the public understanding and sympathy for those with drug induced disorders, and that this in turn can promote investment in research and development of new treatments for addictive disorders. However, there is less sympathy for this approach in Europe.

Overall 80% of funding for drugs research is expended in North America. It can be argued that if 1% of the total budget for drugs policy in the UK was spent on research, it would increase the research capacity of the field by over 10-fold. Such an investment is a critical component of an approach to developing a more rational and effective drug policy for the coming decade.

Ever and past year drug use in 16-35 yr olds

	Ever used		Used in past year	
	1993	2000	1993	2000
Cannabis	19.6%	45.2%	8.3%	20.9%
Cocaine	1.8%	9.2%	0.4%	4.2%
Amphetamines	5.0%	15.1%	1.8%	4.8%

SUMMARY

- There has been a substantial growth in the number of people who have ever used and recently used illicit drugs. Drug-dependence is especially prevalent in prison occupants.
- Both public and political opinion is subjective and very influenced by the media. Only carefully controlled scientific research on the neurophysiological action of drugs is objective and should form the basis for policies.
- Europe has not been keen to adopt the view of “addiction as a disease of the brain”.
- Compliance and relapse rates when treating drug addiction are similar to many other conditions, such as asthma, hypertension and diabetes. Because these chronic conditions are susceptible to repeated relapse, any treatment has to have a longitudinal dimension to it.
- Social and cultural issues must be considered and tied in with scientific understanding in order to produce an informed policy that is also practical and achievable.
- Research in the UK is severely under-funded compared to the US, and this discrepancy needs to be addressed.

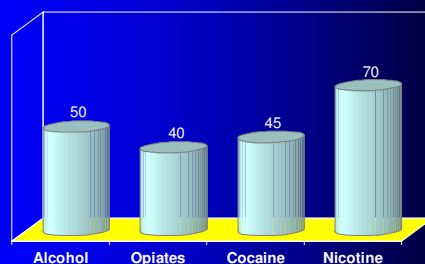
CONCLUSION

- Problems associated with drugs continually change as different drugs gain popularity.
- Science and research must focus on the different problems which arise from different drugs in order to provide a better understanding and make the case for more rational responses.
- More investment is needed for research on drug addiction and the potential therapeutic uses of these substances.
- US drug policy dominates worldwide, despite issues in other countries being very different.
- We need a better understanding of how drug use and abuse affects our society. It is necessary to establish links between what needs to be done socially and the scientific findings and treatments being developed.

SUMMARY OF KEY INFORMATION OUTLINED BY PREVIOUS SPEAKERS

- Drugs of abuse activate a common reward pathway.
- Learning is a very important component in drug addiction.
- What fires together wires together.
- Most drug abusers are polydrug users.
- Addiction favours immediate versus delayed rewards.
- It is important to provide accurate information to the public.
- We need better pharmacological and behavioural treatments for addiction.
- Cravings can be modified through dopamine receptor modifications.
- Need for open discussion on use of cannabinoid agents for possible therapeutic uses.
- Need more longitudinal studies on effects of drug abuse because relapses are very common.
- Need for better understanding of functional use of drugs of abuse.
- Need for an evidence-based approach to prevention and treatment.
- Need for improved access to treatment.
- Current US style policy dominates despite issues being different in different countries.

Relapse Rates following treatment



O'Brien & McLellan, 1996, *The Lancet*

9 Year old in Thailand



In Asia there is currently an explosion of methamphetamine abuse