

MORNING DISCUSSION SESSION

Mike Trace

Is it realistic to expect policy makers to base policies on evidence in the future?

Jan Wiarda

There are several important categories of policy makers so, in addressing this question, we need to define what is meant by the term. At the higher level, there are politicians, civil servants, NGOs and scientists thinking critically about the problem. At street level, there are workers in medicine, social welfare and prisons. They are all policy makers, but the politicians and those that advise them directly are the most important category to target. We must also question to what extent the media themselves act as policymakers or agenda setters. The present EU Commissioner, when he was the leader of the Liberal Conservative party in the Netherlands, agreed that irrational approaches should be avoided, and substances regulated sensibly, but he questioned how to explain these views to his voters. Politics is not usually based on evidence, rather the illusion of rationality. We should consider that policymakers have to be convinced and politicians have to be seduced to base policies on real evidence.

Brian Paddick

Politicians will only base policy on evidence if the evidence is clear and is accepted by the public. The present evidence is uncertain, as nobody knows exactly what will happen if you do liberalise. It also needs to be accepted by the media, as there seems to be a decline in conviction politicians and a rise in politicians who will make whatever decision is necessary to increase the number of votes attracted by their political party. So if the evidence is clear and convincing, and you can convince the public and the media that it is the right direction to go in, then politicians will follow because they will see that as a way of securing more votes. Although a circuitous route, that is one way of basing policy on evidence, rather than just presenting the evidence to the politicians and asking them to change their minds.

David Nutt

Talking as a scientist from within the Foresight Project, I would be surprised if the drugs used in 20 years' time will be different to those used now. We have got enough problems today, so we would not want to be sidetracked into thinking there would be a completely different set of emergent problems. We need to focus on the present problems in order to set conditions and paradigms for dealing with any future drugs.

Mike Trace

One view talks of constant new challenges with continuously reinvented drugs, while the other says you can only get high and come down, and there are different ways of achieving that. The future is likely to bring differently-named drugs, produced in different ways. The point relevant to policy is that we still have a mindset around the cultivation and transportation of natural products, and intercepting these. I concede that the way drugs are used will probably be the same, but the production is likely to be different.

Lord Layard

In principle one should weigh out all the different effects of drugs and compare them, but many consider the most important thing in public policy to be the

alleviation of extreme misery. Therefore, in the scale of harm, the elimination of addiction would have a different standing from almost everything else.

Colin Blakemore

You are quite right to suggest that reducing misery or increasing pleasure in the joy of life should be what we are aiming at. However, the misery associated with drugs is often the product of the way in which drugs are supplied or maintained rather than the action of the drug on the body. An interesting example is the wife of William Osler, possibly the greatest physician of the first half of the last century, who became addicted to narcotic painkillers when her husband treated her for some condition. She was a doyenne of North Oxford, did great charitable works, was very active in society and was maintained as an addict, injected by her husband twice a day, all her life. It is not so much the drugs that make life miserable, it is the way in which they are supplied, the crime that is necessary to support this supply, the problem of drug contamination, the routes of administration and so on. So one has to stand back a bit on the issue of whether it is the drugs that actually cause the misery.

Lord Layard

Would you say the same then about alcohol? Alcohol addiction is pretty awful, even if you are able to afford it. If alcohol addiction cannot be controlled very well, does this support making it easier for people to get addicted to other substances?

Colin Blakemore

It is clearly not a simple judgement. However, alcohol in excess does actually kill you whereas, if you are protected from the acute effect of respiratory failure associated with heroin overdose, heroin does not. You can live a perfectly normal life sustained on heroin. So it is not addiction alone that kills; it is the associated toxic qualities of what you are taking. Alcohol and tobacco rate highly in that respect, as both are highly addictive, at least to some personalities, and also extremely toxic.

Mark Kleiman

It is not so straightforward as to weigh a lot of distributed benefit against a little bit of concentrated misery. It does seem that the alcohol case is a very strong one, that the misery of addiction is not merely a function of supply difficulty or even of toxicity. Certainly some people can be heroin-dependent for a lifetime without having their lives dominated by heroin-seeking, but that is somewhat short of a normal life. The life of a full-blown heroin addict, even with a lot of heroin around, is a pretty awful one. The claim that we should not regulate any drug less dangerous than alcohol any more rigorously than we regulate alcohol, would be logically sound only if we knew our current alcohol policies were adequately tight. This may be the case, given the difficulty and expense of trying to regulate a drug that is so widely used.

Lord Layard

The interest for many of us, and something there seems to be much confusion about, is what is likely to happen if there was some liberalisation?

Peter Reuter

In terms of making projections about the effect of liberalisation, I have made many detailed tables of predictions, and the most important thing to take away is the huge uncertainty that governs this type of research. Mistrust researchers bearing certainty on this matter.

Sean Cassin

I think we have won the evidence base for harm reduction around individual use, and how things like needle exchange, methadone maintenance, heroin prescribing and safer consumption rooms can be of benefit. The evidence is that these help the people that use drugs and help society. Should the next phase in relation to harm reduction be a shift to looking at the harms within the system, i.e. the harm outcomes of the supply control systems, the criminal justice systems and the health systems?

Peter Reuter

Clearly, if you take the harm reduction framework and ask what it means for a policy research agenda, it is asking what are the harms, as well as the benefits, that come from enforcement. This should definitely be the approach, but there is a research problem finding effect in something as diffuse as enforcement.

Margaret Hamilton

The scientists committed to getting more rational policy still have more homework to do. We have got bits of the jigsaw but certainly not the whole picture. If we cannot convince our colleagues, including civil servants, and cannot take the community with us on this journey of discovery, reflection and thoughtfulness, then we will not get politicians to be bold. I do not think we are sufficiently prepared for opportunities that arise (at local, state, national and, occasionally, international level), to hand over the necessary research evidence to back up changes in policy.

John Strang

An important, if optimistic, conclusion would be the need for a new research warrior that does a lot of preparation beforehand and is ready to act given a very narrow window of opportunity. It would be pretty difficult to do, as funding is hard to secure for an area of work that is not currently topical, and there may even be active governmental and organisational resistance to study in such an area. Instead of experimenting with completely new models, we should look at instances of small incremental change and see whether that has led to an improvement or worsening, as a way of guessing what would happen if change occurred on a larger scale. Changes occur all the time, but go undocumented and certainly unstudied, e.g. downgrading of cannabis, temazepam laws, police activity in response to possession of drugs, etc. These would give us at least a glimpse of what would happen if you moved further forward. The agencies that could help researchers do that, actively block efforts to secure funding or access.

David Nutt

Do you believe that having national institutes that look at addiction is of benefit? Is there evidence that this kind of coming together of expertise has actually been useful?

Margaret Hamilton

Certainly in Australia, it has been crucial. It has been an absolutely vital ingredient to having a much more research-grounded development of services and policies. That is part of the resource of building a critical mass of researchers that can ask and answer some of the questions politicians may ask.

Roger Graef

None of the three sides of the debate really listen to each other, especially the enforcers, but the good news is that quietly, over the last ten years, there has been a behind-the-scenes change both in police and prison policy. Seven or eight years ago there was only one drug-free wing in one prison. Now there are about 30 and they are on the increase. Drug services are available in nearly all prisons. Slowly, below the surface, a kind of common sense argument is being won, while the rhetoric that our colleagues have been describing stays the same.

Another major problem is that the medical profession remains resistant to getting involved in these changes. When the police changed their approach, as they did in Manchester, and were willing to make drug referrals, the local doctors involved would not accept them. They did not recognise drug addiction as an illness, or want violent, unreliable people in their surgeries. There is already a tacit understanding that rehabilitation is better than enforcement. The way out of this is not to expect a big sea change at the top but to enlist other allies. Rather unhelpfully, key players like the medical profession and social services are keeping their distance.

Charlie Lloyd

We are not very good at doing what we can with the best that we have, and we need to get better at this to take advantage of the opportunities that do arise. Researchers need to be a little more fleet of foot, and to comment on issues on the basis of the best evidence they have, rather than remaining silent waiting for stronger evidence.

Peter Reuter

I agree that we need to make sure that real scientists, those that are purists, stay out of this. Many of the studies involved in drug policy have fairly weak research designs, and cannot be published in peer-reviewed literature, but they can still tell us things that can be substantially useful. This is a field in which not very good research can be influential, as it is so much better than any other kind of evidence that is around.

Mark Kleiman

The war on drugs leading to a drug-free society is indeed a faith, and an unreasonable faith. An equally unreasonable faith is the idea of the end of prohibition and a drug-law-free society leading to utopia. The right response to ignorant faith is not more ignorant faith in the opposite direction. The reification of drug laws into prohibition is a big mistake electorally and a catastrophic mistake politically. The drug warriors in the US have convinced the public that the alternative is either the drug war as currently being fought or legalisation, so if you criticise any aspect of the current policy then you are dismissed as a legaliser.

Colin Blakemore

A lot of the fears and concerns about liberalisation seem to be predicated on the assumption that the problem is not there at the moment and that we might create one. In the UK, about half of all school leavers have tried drugs while at school. We are not talking about how experiments of liberalisation would work on a drug-free society. We are asking how changes in attitude might actually help us out of a mess that, if not actually caused by past strict approaches, is at least correlated with them.