

Submission to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Family and
Community Affairs
House of Representatives
Parliament House Canberra
Australia

Drug Abuse: How are we handling it?

Facts

The Australian Parliamentary Group for Drug Law Reform committee presented a paper to the 8th International Conference on Drug Policy Reform in Washington in November, 1994 called Organising Drug Law Reform in Australia. The Group accepts the international evidence that prohibition policies have not reduced the illegal sale of opioids, have not reduced the number of people taking drugs nor have they been effective in getting people to stop taking drugs. Prohibition policies also work actively against health policies seeking to control the spread of AIDS.

A Charter for Drug Law Reform was drawn up which seeks to encourage a rational, tolerant, non-judgmental, humanitarian and understanding approach to people who currently use illicit drugs. The aims of the Group are to minimise the adverse health, social and economic consequences of Australia's current policies and laws controlling drug use and supply.

The Group is unequivocally opposed to the policies of prohibition and boldly asserts that we are and always have been a drug-taking society, and no matter what the moralists, the righteous, the wowsers might say, drug use will continue to be a facet of the fabric of our society.

The Australian Drug Law Reform Foundation seeks to promote an unequivocal opposition to policies of prohibition with regard to illicit drugs and in their place to promote the nation wide adoption of drug policies based on harm minimisation strategies. Its long-term objective is to seek a national commitment to undermine the black market and illicit trade in drugs of dependency and psychotropic substances, with its inherent problems by reassessment of Australia's commitment to the International Treaties on illicit drugs and psychotropic substances. Chapter 4 of their 1996 report outlines in chilling detail the extent to which national internal policy world-wide has been invaded by US moral imperialism, leading to greater internal social problems for most of the countries involved.

Dr John Mackellar, President of Private Doctors of Australia and Mooroopna practitioner, reported in 1998 that Private Doctors of Australia believes drugs should be readily available to people the same way alcohol and tobacco are. The association doesn't believe government can protect people. It believes these drugs are harmful but more harm comes from making things illegal than allowing them to be purchased under proper conditions.

Legalisation should entail regulations against sale to children and restrictions on advertising. Cannabis consumption could be limited to licensed premises and private households. The state should also take charge of quality control and consumer rights. Over-the-counter marijuana should be sold with warnings against driving or operating machinery, and accurate information on health risks could be provided.

Legalisation would undermine organised crime, release police time and Resources and provide income to the government. There would be huge savings on enforcement and incarceration costs, not to mention the advantage of having hundreds of thousands of tax-payers back in the community.

A US study commissioned by the Drug Enforcement Agency in the mid 1980s concluded that cannabis is one of the safest therapeutically active substances known.

Although it is claimed that new evidence shows that cannabis is more harmful than was thought in the 60s, most recent studies have tended to confirm cannabis's relative safety, refuting claims that it causes birth defects, brain damage and reduced levels of testosterone. (Release Publications, 1995)

In March, 1998, Professor David Penington, who headed the Victorian Premier's Drugs Advisory Council, said the taskforce believed there was a need to educate people about the dangers of excessive use of marijuana, but in the meantime young people regard it as somewhat hypocritical when they are declared criminals for using marijuana when we know that alcohol abuse causes far more deaths.

Also in 1998, the World Health Organization released a report on marijuana and health, for which three scientists (Robin Room, a Canadian, and two Australians) were commissioned to compare the health and psychological consequences of marijuana, alcohol, tobacco and opiates. In publication the comparisons with other drugs were dropped because they seemed to show marijuana as less harmful than tobacco or alcohol. Room reports that alcohol and tobacco are the main sources of drug harm in Canada today. The cost-of-illness comparisons of the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse showed \$7.5 billion in 1992 for alcohol, \$9.5 billion for tobacco, and \$1.4 billion for all illicit drugs together.

New Zealand's Drug Policy Reform Trust includes some of the most respected names in medical science in New Zealand. They argue that the first step towards a sensible drugs policy is to regulate the use of cannabis in the same way as alcohol or tobacco. David Hadorn, head of the Trust, says it is a myth that cannabis destroys the ability to do school work, particularly in older teens. The belief that cannabis acts as a gateway to other drugs is also incorrect, he says. In the Netherlands where cannabis has been liberalised, fewer teenagers have tried hard drugs than in countries like the US with harsh prohibition policies.

He notes that even if the Government were prepared to consider cannabis reform, it would face huge pressure from the US to abort any liberalisation. He describes the US as the home of modern day cannabis hysteria and prohibition and says it has twisted the arms of other countries to go along with it. He complains that the Reuters story about the suppressed WHO report on cannabis was suppressed by the US media. He describes the current prohibition Situation as dishonest, embarrassing and unhealthy. Despite the use of international drug treaties by the US to bully other governments over cannabis reform, Hadorn believes that cannabis law reform is inevitable.

In a review of *Drug Use in Australia: A Harm Minimisation Approach*, (Margaret Hamilton, Allan Kellehear and Greg Rumbold, Eds), Ian Mathews reports The book examines how some drugs have social acceptance while others have Been demonised, the dividing line being their legality, not their intrinsic properties or even the harm they do when abused. Illegal drug users are characterised as sinners, sick or social victims with attendant theories of why people turn to drugs. Few accept that most do so because they enjoy their effect - just as smokers and social drinkers enjoy their drugs.

It is true to say that the vast majority of people who take alcohol do so without causing medical or social harm. Most people in society have learned to use a potentially-dangerous substance, which shares certain negative effects with cannabis, in measures which are both tolerable and in some ways, efficacious. In Mathews' view, there is a strong case for treating the smoking of cannabis in much the same way as we treat the consumption of alcohol.

On 1st June 1998, an open letter to Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, signed by 600 prominent people world-wide, was published in the New York Times. The co-signers stated that they believe that the global war on drugs is now causing more harm than drug abuse itself. They claim that the illegal drug industry is a \$400 billion market that has empowered organized criminals, corrupted governments at all levels, eroded internal security, stimulated violence and distorted both economic market and moral values.

These are the consequences, they state, of decades of failed and futile drug War policies. They call for the initiation of a truly open and honest dialogue regarding the future of global drug control policies, in which fear, prejudice and Punitive prohibition yield to common sense, science, public health and human rights.

Dr Ernest Drucker, an American public health professional, (Sydney Morning Herald, 6/3/2000) describes the US approach of prohibition, prosecution and incarceration as insanely self-destructive, and criticises the US for doing everything possible to influence the Commonwealth to desist from the very innovations, such as needle exchange programs and involvement of drug user organisations, that have saved many Australian lives. He suggests this lethal posture towards its own citizens by the US is the price of the hypocritical lapse in

moral judgment evidenced by its drug policies.

The November Coalition Foundation (a popular-based US movement against US drug policy, founded by Nora Callahan in 1997 to give families of imprisoned drug-users a voice) reports that prison is currently America's fastest growing industry, with over two million people behind bars, of whom 1.3 million are non-violent first-time offenders. Prosecuting Americans for marijuana charges has become the easiest way for the US Government to lock up its own people.

There are 1 in 6 people in prison for cannabis and there is a cannabis arrest every 40 seconds. In 1998 there were 682,895 cannabis arrests and that was more than murder, rape, aggravated assault and robbery combined.

Abuse means misuse, make bad use of; use means application to a purpose.

Opinions

The question should be what are the social and economic costs of the way society currently deals with mood enhancing substance use.

The biggest impact drug use has on our society is the negative consequences to our collective psyche of the enormous hypocrisy with which the issue is debated.

Our society makes pragmatic and unfair distinctions between legally and illegally available drugs, without ever addressing the real reasons why anyone uses a mood enhancing substance, and why people use more at some times than at others.

People use mood enhancing substances for relaxation. Alcohol and tobacco, narcotics, cocaine, amphetamines, hallucinogens and cannabis are all used for relaxation and enjoyment. There is no reason why this use of any of these substances should be more or less socially acceptable than any other. They all have some risks attached, and it is important to educate people on how to relax safely. Safely does not necessarily mean without drugs.

People also use these substances to alleviate psychological pain, and it is this circumstance that leads people to use the substance at a rate that others, not in such pain, do not need. The hypocrisy of people from stable, comfortable

backgrounds legislating that those from unstable, miserable backgrounds should not be allowed to use the substance or behaviour of their choice to help them get through their lives is devastating our self-respect as a society. The failure of common sense and understanding in this system is obvious to all, but the powers-that-be have a vested interest in maintaining the legal status quo because the structure of our political system is weighted against disrupting convenient public perceptions, even when they are misinformative.

Success at the polls is far too influential a factor on government policy making, and is causing us to ignore the very real social problems that lie behind high level use of stress relief which need to be addressed.

Arguments and recommendations for action

Taken to its logical extreme, in this view, all substances and behaviours employed for their narcotic, soporific or analgesic effects, substances and behaviours that in and of themselves increase the likelihood they will be repeated, due to their effect on the human central nervous system (and this includes sex, sugar, gambling and illegal and legal drugs, including tobacco, alcohol and caffeine), should be brought under the same legislation. Such legislation should rule all profit from provision of these products and services can only be appropriated by non-profit ventures created specifically to fund all excess revenue into community based social enhancement centres.

Society should specifically exclude big business from involvement in these entities and activities, and the mission statement of the non-profit ventures should be to educate about, facilitate and encourage temperate use of any of the specified products or services. Workers in these industries would come under the same legislations already enacted for current industrial relations for similar industries. It should be illegal to advertise or promote these substances or behaviours, or to display them or information advertising them anywhere children will have access, and illegal to discriminate against people for indulging in them.

To effectively remedy the negative effects of over-use of sedative and analgesic substances and behaviours, society has to bring down the general stress levels to which individuals are subjected. Excessive consumerism and a society that has become reliant on it and come to perceive it as normal and essential are the genuine causes of most of society's problems. The Machiavellian manipulation of perceived supply and demand by those who stand to profit most from maintaining the status quo is nothing short of an international atrocity. If we are ever to solve society's problems, we must honestly address their true causes.

This would also entail serious governmental commitment to the education of the population in all forms of communication and effectiveness training, such as communication skills, assertiveness and parent effectiveness training. These courses should be available at schools, colleges and tertiary and Corrective institutions of all sorts, and at community centres throughout the community.

Because such a policy is counter to the prevailing economic myth that more is better, such a policy will cause extreme dislocation in the industries affected, including all current providers of the goods and services proscribed, particularly the alcohol, sugar, tea, coffee, gambling and advertising industries.

It would be at this point that society's true problems would become glaringly apparent. Human greed and deceit, hiding behind the corporate veil, are the true

enemies of society, and it will take a government of very strong people to release the grasp they have on contemporary political, social and financial power mongers.

Only in such an enlightened environment would we be able usefully to calculate the effects of social and emotional stress relief behaviour on personal relationships, law and health.

The health issue then becomes a matter of why are we not researching safe methods of ingesting mood-enhancers? Why can't alcohol-type intoxication be produced without liver damage, smoking effects without lung and heart damage, and so on?

We do not have the head-set at the moment to ask these questions because we are still trapped in the fallacy that individuals cannot manage their own use of mood-enhancers, all other things being equal. Instead we deny to ourselves how outrageously unequal things are, and scapegoat the very people whose circumstances are a warning to the rest of us of the danger we are in, as a humane, intelligent society.

Conclusions

Social and economic costs of the way society currently handles substance abuse with particular regard to:

Family relationships

The effect of the way we distinguish between licit and illicit mood-enhancers causes a great deal of stress on families. Parents, who know from years of casual use that a particular substance is no more dangerous than legal, socially-sanctioned mood enhancing substances and behaviours, are faced with the dilemma of lying to their children, or explaining to them that the law is often right but not always.

Crime, violence and law enforcement

The effect of high-end use of mood-enhancing substances and behaviours is a different matter from use for relaxation and commonly related to stress. It occurs with both licit and illicit substance use and behaviours, and the social response should be the same in both cases, i.e. provision of social support services for the individual and their family. Early, concerned, intelligent intervention would save society and its members a great deal of time and money wasted on inappropriate responses, such as legal enforcement of selective prohibition and incarceration, splitting up of families and the high cost of dealing with the delinquency of children because they and their families were not given timely, appropriate support at an earlier stage. Black market and organised crime activity, law enforcement and correction costs and violence consequent on the illegality of some substances would all be reduced.

Road trauma

There is no reason current prohibitions related to driving while drunk cannot be extended to cover all mood-enhancing substance use. The most significant

contributor to road accidents is alcohol. Society tolerates this and works in other ways to discourage intoxicated people from driving. Cannabis by itself actually causes a driver to become very cautious, and is usually only a contributing factor to road accidents when mixed with alcohol. There are already mechanisms in place to deal with this problem; they simply need to be expanded to cover all drugs. This would necessitate research to develop adequate testing techniques.

Workplace safety and productivity

Again, alcohol is the most dangerous substance in the workplace, along with drugs that cause drowsiness. Current warnings and education about workplace safety can easily be applied to include all mood-enhancing substances. Compliance by workers would very likely remain the same, because the majority of illicit drug users are reasonable working people, who are happy to pay their taxes and abide by the law, on the whole.

Health care costs

The health care costs of illicit drugs are no greater and, in fact, probably a lot less than the health care costs related to alcohol and tobacco. If sugar and caffeine consumption are also brought into the formula, it is clear that most members of society are engaging in behaviours that have significant implications for health care costs. If a user pays principle must be adopted, it may well be that taxation at selling point would be the most efficient way of collecting contributions. This can only be effected if all mood-enhancing substances and behaviours are on the same legal footing.

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