

Drug Classification

Last month, the Science and Technology Committee published a scathing report on the drug classification system describing it as anomalous, opaque and “unfit for purpose”. The Advisory Committee on the Misuse of Drugs was also heavily criticised. This briefing looks at the background to the committee’s inquiry, what the report said in detail and its likely impact.

What’s the background to the report?

The Science and Technology Committee is undertaking an inquiry into whether Government policy is evidence based and decided to use the drug classification system as one of three case studies. As part of the inquiry, it invited written submissions from stakeholders late last year and subsequently held a number of oral hearings, during which senior figures from the ACMD, medical profession, police, and drug research and policy fields, were questioned. The report *Drug Classification: making a hash of it?* sets out the committee’s conclusions after considering the information presented.

What does the report conclude?

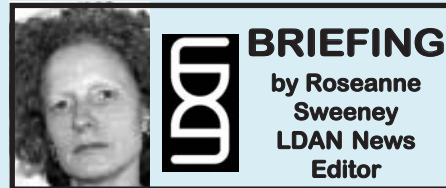
The report is thoroughly dismissive of the drug classification system. It criticises the rationale underpinning it, the process used to arrive at decisions and the decisions themselves. It says there is no evidence classification has a deterrent effect, despite the fact that this appears to underpin classification policy, and that the Government’s “proclivity” for using it as a way of “sending out signals” to potential users is not based on evidence, and at odds with the objective of classifying drugs on the basis of harm. It says the system is anomalous, as decisions are based on varying rationale - a situation not helped by the “disconcerting degree of confusion” about the remit of the ACMD between its members and the Home Office. And it takes a swipe at some classification decisions, saying for instance that there was a “striking lack of evidence” to justify magic mushrooms being made a Class A drug last year.

What does the committee recommend?

Describing it as “unfit for purpose”, the science committee recommends that the system be replaced with a

more scientifically based scale of harm, separate from the criminal penalties attached for possession or dealing. Detaching penalties from the harm ranking would permit a more sophisticated and scientific approach to assessing harm, it says, as well as making it more responsive to changes in the evidence base. This would have more credibility than the current system where the placing of drugs in a particular category is “ultimately a political decision”, and would also allow legal drugs like alcohol and smoking to be included on the scale.

What does it say about the ACMD?



The report is critical of the ACMD and particularly its chair Michael Rawlings. Its chief criticism is that the advisory body has not done enough to stand up for the system’s integrity. It says it was a “dereliction of the ACMD’s duty” not to alert the Home Secretary much earlier to its doubts about the system’s effectiveness and criticises it for failing to speak out when the Government reclassified magic mushrooms without consulting it. It accuses the ACMD itself of being unscientific and of adding to the confusion around the purpose of classification, by advising last year that methamphetamine should be maintained as a class B drug because of the signal upgrading it, would send out. The report also says the workings of the ACMD lack transparency, something it should address by publishing the agendas and minutes of meetings.

Who comes well out of the report? Transform are delighted with the

report’s conclusions. It lobbied the science committee to take up drugs classification as a case study, and put a lot of work into the inquiry, which paid off. The committee agreed with many of the points made by Transform and makes a number of references to the reform group’s evidence in the report. Action on Addiction should also be pleased. The report repeats the points it made in its submission, criticising the Government for consistently failing to evaluate the impact of drug policy decisions by carrying out research, and describing the current level of investment in addiction research as “woefully inadequate”.

Likely impact?

The report generated a slew of media headlines and plenty of debate. Perhaps the most interesting point made by the committee, is that the harm ranking of substances should be detached from penalties. It did not elaborate any further however leaving others to speculate how this might work. Martin Barnes, head of Drugscope and an ACMD member, wrote in the *Independent* that there has to be a link with penalties, though he supports the inclusion of alcohol on a harm ranking. Katy Swaine, head of legal services in Release, says that the harm ranking should not always dictate the penalties attached - though it should dictate the direction of information and education campaigns about the substance. Whether the Home Office itself is willing to join in the debate is unclear. Charles Clarke announced a review of drug classification in January but his replacement John Reid has shown no indication that he is willing to take up a process, that as the science committee showed, raises all sorts of difficult issues. In the meantime, bruised and lacking support, the current drug classification system, limps on.