

Cannabis casualty

The driving force behind the government's decision to ignore the recommendation of the ACMD on cannabis was to send a message to young people about its dangers. But there is another message coming across, argues Harry Shapiro – that the truth is being sacrificed for political and moral gain.

In the summer of 2007, in the wake of fears about the increasing availability of strong cannabis, it was announced that the ACMD was to be asked once again to consider the classification of cannabis. But unlike the two previous occasions in 2003 and 2005 – and for the first time in the history of the ACMD – the government, in the shape of the incoming Prime Minister, was publicly stating that it had every intention of changing the law.

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So what was the evidence to support this view going into the latest round of ACMD deliberations? There was no new clinical evidence linking cannabis with severe mental health problems. Despite claims that young people were confused about the classification of cannabis to the point of thinking it was legal, there was no evidence of rising use – quite the reverse. There was no evidence that reverting cannabis to Class B would deter use. As the penalties for trafficking in Class B and C drugs were the same, it could not be argued that this would be a way of cracking down on the gangs



growing indigenous cannabis in commercial quantities.

And what about the evidence provided to the ACMD during the proceedings? The latest forensic evidence suggested that on average cannabis available in the UK might have doubled in strength in the past ten years due to the rise in commercial indoor growing – although no clinical evidence was presented as to what that might mean for users. And actually it is possible that declining use among people is linked to the greater strength of the drug – they just don't want to smoke it. ACPO claimed that commercial growers had been encouraged by the reclassification to set up shop here, but offered no evidence to support this. And as for mental health issues, research using GP records indicated that there had been no increase in cases of schizophrenia since between 1996 and 2004. Incidentally, since the ACMD sent their report to the government, ACPO have said if the law was changed, it would not be revising its guidance on the policing of cannabis, meaning that there would be no shift in police priorities to arrest people for simple possession.

So in those circumstances, the ACMD delivered the only reasonable conclusion – there is insufficient evidence to support a reversion of cannabis to Class B. Yet the government has chosen to ignore the advice in favour of what is seen as a political message – which will in turn be ignored. But the government may be sending another, potentially far more damaging message: it is not interested in evidence when it doesn't suit political or moral expediencies.

Desperately tragic stories about lives lost or damaged by drugs take centre stage in the media. Emotions run high against which pleas on behalf of the evidence-base can appear singularly inappropriate. But the idea of robust evidence as a key driver for drug policy must be protected and all assaults on its integrity strongly challenged. Why? Because those with serious drug problems are among the most vilified and unprotected in society. The shrill voices of the media and the moral absolutists regularly combine to drown out the humane and compassionate policy options often revealed by impartial and dispassionate research. As Mike Ashton re-iterated during the recent DrugScope treatment debates, addiction does not happen because something goes 'wrong' in the brain of an individual – it is the result of a dysfunctional relationship between the person and the environment around them. Change the environment and you go a long way to helping change the person. We can only learn how to do that by a scrupulous attention to the best that research can offer.