

# David and Goliath



Professor David Nutt, Head of Neuropsychopharmacology at Imperial College, London was famously sacked as chairman of the government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) last October. He now heads up the newly established Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs (ISCD), which is being managed by the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. He tells **Jeremy Sare** how he is finished dwelling on the past and why the ISCD will become the first port of call for drug advice.

## The ISCD membership of 26 seems to have coalesced very quickly. How did this come about?

"Most came to me. They're all scientists, no real policy people. So don't expect us to come up with policy statements. We have two experts for every level of drug science; psychology, forensic science, chemistry, neuroscience, addiction treatment, epidemiology and social science. We've got all the bases covered and with back up."

## Who does the Committee exist for?

"Our audience is the public and that also includes the media, the politicians and other scientists. We want to be the first port of call for anyone wanting to know about drugs whether for the full analysis or just general information. There is still a huge need for an independent body to be delivering scientific-based advice on the true harms of drugs. And that's all psychoactive drugs whether controlled or legally available."

## What is the Committee doing at the moment?

"At the Committee's first meeting in January, the members established four work programmes on cognition enhancers (smart drugs); ketamine; an improved harm assessment system and multi-layered decision-making on risks. Each programme has its own small research team.

"The ketamine and cognitive enhancers programmes should be complete by the end of the year. We did the original ACMD ketamine study in 2004 when use was low. Now it's big business and there is growing concern about links to serious bladder problems because of the toxicity of ketamine."

## What plans are in place for engaging with the public?

"We want to be very strong on education: the information needs to be written in accessible language. Much of it will be web-based, aimed at young people. And we already have quite a presence on Facebook.

"We're launching our website ([www.drugscience.co.uk](http://www.drugscience.co.uk)) in early April and for starters it will contain a kind of slideshow presentation on mephedrone. People don't really know about the science and harms of this drug so we really need to get that information out there, it's really urgent."

## But TalktoFrank is a big resource for drugs information already.

"We would complement the Frank material, some of it is quite good. But schools need a lot more information, it's more important than ever before. I didn't realise teachers can't teach the truth about drugs. When I was sacked, teachers wrote to me saying, 'we're not allowed to reproduce your table of harms or to say alcohol is more dangerous than ecstasy.' I was gob-smacked when I heard that."

## The inherent danger of being a self-appointed committee means people can ignore you. How do you establish your committee's relevance?

"We're relevant because the Science and Technology Committee in 2007 said scientific advice should be independent. The ACMD can't perform that function. They are within a government department so the pressure, whether overt or covert, is ever-present.

"Independence is vital. There are other precedents like the Bank of England and the British Heart Forum where advice

is totally independent. It's about giving the best advice. Where there is conflict between science and policy, we can make sure that is made apparent."

## And how, practically, will you stay in the public eye?

"We need a lot of press presence, certainly. There will be media briefings after each meeting of ISCD. And we will be speaking through the media to the public and government about whether the science supports the policy decisions. I am also writing to a great many of the senior figures and groups in the drugs field for meetings including the ACMD. I am comfortable discussing ISCD's role with any group."

## Will the ISCD prevent its membership from commenting on wider political issues, such as harm reduction, and not just the science?

"First the members have their opinions and are free to say what they wish and to whom. Many have worked in government and they want to be able to express themselves without fear. On that specific point on 'harm reduction', I think we would make our position clear on supporting evidence-based drug treatment."

## How are you going to fund the Committee?

"We have financial backing from Toby Jackson, a hedge fund manager. He's underwritten us for three years, at £150k a year. We will be looking for additional funding from charities, foundations, trusts and through contractual work, perhaps even for government. But the initial input [of £450K] means we are confident we have that continuity. We're here to stay."