

# EDUCATING THE FORCE

**Fear was Shelagh Hetreed's initial reaction when asked to train schools liaison police about drug education. But the experience convinced her that police can be productively engaged in a progressive strategy, to the benefit of the children they contact inside and outside the school.**

## Shelagh Hetreed

WHEN I WAS asked to run a two-day training course for schools liaison and community police in Avon and Somerset, I felt more than a little apprehensive. The invitation came about through a talk to a police conference about drugs education being seen not as a separate topic area, but integrated into a school's personal and social education programme. I also mentioned many feel a 'shock horror' approach, using a video or a one-off lecture by an expert, is the least effective means of changing behaviour.

The reaction was a request for training similar to that given to teachers so police might approach this area in a complementary, rather than possibly a counter-productive, way. The course was set up to take place at the police training headquarters in Bristol in May.

When it came to planning the two days, every stereotype I discovered I had about likely police attitudes came to the fore and fear and trepidation set in. However, myself and my co-tutors Nigel Laycock (Somerset's drug education coordinator) and Sue Bandcroft (health education officer) decided to offer a course almost identical to that offered to teachers.

Our biggest uncertainty was how the 38 police attending the course would react to participatory sessions. This fear grew as the first morning was given over to traditional introductory talks by their chief constable and the head of the drug squad. After lunch, as we scrambled to rearrange the chairs into an open circle, those who arrived first looked anxious. But our worries were unfounded, as almost immediately they began to relax and seemed to enjoy the climate-setting exercises in small groups.

Discussion was always friendly and open. We began with an exercise in ranking drugs from 'acceptable' to 'not acceptable', including champagne, tobacco, solvents, coffee, etc, as well as the more topical illegal varieties. Value-clarification exercises followed and evaluations at the

*The author is Advisory Teacher for Drug Education for the county of Avon. She can be contacted at Kingswood Teachers Centre, phone 0272 615528.*

end of the course indicated how much the chance to air views and discuss issues openly had been appreciated. Several resources were introduced and worked through, especially the 14-18 *Drugwise* pack, which is being supplied to each participant's unit.

The two days were extremely well received. Judging by the feedback, a lot was learnt and it was much enjoyed. It was also one of the most enjoyable courses we had led as tutors. The police seemed to be able to enjoy themselves but also to commit themselves and cooperate fully. Their evaluations said they had found group work a stimulating and excellent learning method. I learnt that it is absurd to stereotype any group — even the police.

---

### *After the course a sergeant said his force no longer used shock horror tactics*

---

WHAT ARE THE potential educational benefits of such an exercise? We are in cloud-cuckoo land if we believe police can be kept out of drug education. Many schools will turn to them for help before they turn to health educators or drug education coordinators, and many teachers still want the police to step in and take over the class or talk to the whole year or school assembly. Even if not invited in for this reason, police are in contact with the school and its pupils for all sorts of other reasons — they are there.

So much the better then if they give out messages similar to those from other agencies and feel confident enough to refuse to take a whole year group or school assembly. Even better if instead they make positive suggestions on how the school could proceed and suggest contacting local educational resources, such as drug education coordinators.

Teachers will still want visitors to take some of the load on a subject where they feel less than expert. But if both sides are trained and aware of the need for integrated teaching, this could be fitted into a worked-out drug education programme, with the police making special contributions in areas such as drug laws and crimes committed in order to obtain drugs.

**Card games of a different kind — police get down to the intricacies of the *DrugWise* pack**



In my experience police are willing to do this — in some respects, they are more advanced than teachers, who often come to courses thinking 'drugs' equals 'hard drugs', while police appreciate that most problems with school-age children start (and usually stay) with cigarettes, alcohol and solvents.

Probably the best indicator of the success of the course was a phone call from a sergeant indignant at having received a letter from a well-meaning member of the public, suggesting a video she thought police could show to every school child over ten to frighten them off taking drugs. The officer informed her that police in his area no longer used this sort of 'shock horror' tactic, and explained strategies felt to be more appropriate.

Potential benefits of involving the police are not limited to drug education in schools. It can only be beneficial for police who come into contact with young people to have 'pupil-friendly' strategies up their sleeves and to have been given a little time on a course clarifying issues and learning about the field. Since skills developed by current drug education methods are basic life-skills, ways of promoting these skills can be applied to a range of adolescent 'problem' areas. After all, schools liaison officers deal with a variety of petty crimes besides drugtaking, many with the same root causes.

Most counties have just one drug education coordinator and many may disappear once central funding finishes in 1989. It would seem important then to reach as many potential advocates of progressive educational techniques as we can find, in order to promote a continuity of approach for all our young people, whether it be from a teacher, health education officer, parent or a schools liaison police officer.

WE KNOW THAT one-off sessions are the least effective in the long term. So let us go for a continuous programme delivered in a style that can enable each young person to take responsibility for him/herself, and which will equip them with the ability to make an informed decision in a community where they can feel supported by all the agencies they might come into contact with. □