

Is there really a London connection?

The case for the defence in the exchange of views between Dr John Marks of Widnes and London's drug dependence specialists, accused by him of killing the British system

BRITAIN'S DRUG PROBLEMS are getting worse and in the last issue of *Druglink* John Marks was right to recognise this. However, his argument that recent policies have aggravated the drug problem is, to say the least, contentious, and his view that the London drug dependency unit consultants should shoulder the blame is incredible. Marks supposes that prohibition has failed but does not see that decriminalisation would be a disaster. His modest proposal for a national remedy amounts to no more than widespread prescription of heroin or cocaine.

There can be no simple solution to the problems of opiate misuse. Any response to the drug-problem has to be based on science and a full consideration of the effects of changed policies. Dr Marks and other doctors before him who advocate quick-fix solutions, fail to see that their policies are part of the problem.

In criticising the "London consultants" and other groups, suggesting they have undue influence on official policy, he shows little awareness of the true situation. Since drug dependency units were established in the late 1960s, the London consultants have held regular meetings to coordinate clinic responses, and not

the least, to provide each other with regular support. The group has no official status or privileged access to the corridors of power, no collective prescribing policy or mandate to develop one, and operates purely by consensus to promote the most appropriate clinical response to the drug

His remedy is merely widespread prescription of heroin or cocaine

treatment needs of the capital. The government's Medical Advisor on Drugs, currently a drug dependence consultant in London, advises the Chief Medical Officer in a personal capacity and not as a representative of his colleagues in London.

Another link in Dr Marks' illusionary conspiracy is the suggestion that the addiction committees of the Royal College of Psychiatrists are also dominated by London. *Druglink* readers may not be aware that the College's Substance Misuse Section has an Executive Committee elected from the whole membership. In suggesting London consultants have some sort of preferential access to the College, all he does is to question the validity of the election process and his election to the Executive Committee! His election puts the lie to the suggestion that the col-

lege excludes "peripheral" psychiatrists.

Dr Marks' views are almost certainly not held by most of his colleagues in the Royal College, not due to any three line whip imposed by London, but because the majority view reflects what's known about good practice in this difficult specialty. It is unfair and unbelievable that in a democratic society, the views of the majority should be subject to criticism and attack, simply because they are not shared by a small, but vocal minority.

Certainly, the College plays an important part in the supervision and provision of training which also – as it should – reflects what's known about good practice. But what Dr Marks chooses to see as an inter-generational transfer of the conspiracy against his views is nothing more than the normal process of medical training based on the weight of clinical judgement. It would be strange indeed for it to be otherwise. It is to be hoped and expected that doctors who have been trained would have very different views on the management of drug misuse problems from those who have not received such training. It is however perverse to suggest that the views of trained doctors should be discounted in favour of the untrained.

In the final analysis it is sad that Dr Marks chooses to represent the debate about drug misuse policies as a difference between London and elsewhere. The contributions of consultant colleagues from all parts of the country have been of great influence on policy. It is unreasonable that their contribution is ignored by Dr Marks as if he is the sole voice of services outside the capital. There is currently a lively debate about drug issues and responses. However across the country – even in Dr Marks' locality – there is greater concordance with the majority professional view than with his views.

from
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THE CHARGE

This article responds to the article by Dr John Marks "Who killed the British system?" on page 15 of the July/August issue of *Druglink*. There he accused London-based drug dependency consultant psychiatrists of using their prestige and resources to restrict addicts' access to legally prescribed drugs, thereby relinquishing control of the drug market to illicit dealers.