

New Labour, new broom

I AM DELIGHTED TO HAVE THIS early opportunity to share with the readers of *Druglink* the Government's approach to a manifestly serious social problem. In accepting the Prime Minister's invitation in May to take on the role of Ministerial Drugs Coordinator, I was well aware of the importance and gravity of the challenges which need to be addressed. I know too that any lasting progress in this area depends critically on the skills and commitment of those at the 'sharp end' – drug workers, teachers, doctors, youth and social workers, customs, police, probation and prison officers. The Government's responsibility is clear – to provide a sustainable framework so that all these agencies – in partnership with others in the community – can tackle drug misuse systematically and effectively.

The valuable briefing discussions I have already had with some in the drug field (not least the director of ISDD) have strongly reinforced my sense that we are not in the business of slick 'cause and effect' answers to a problem of such profound complexity. So rather than give you a glib "wish-list", let me just outline here what I regard as our priorities over the next few months.

Could do better

We need to build up enduring and effective partnerships against drugs across the whole country. As the Opposition, we supported the broad thrust of the former Government's *Tackling Drugs Together* strategy, and I know that Tony Newton's leadership role in particular earned deserved and widespread respect. I have been encouraged, for example, by what I have seen of the progress of Drug Action Teams across England, and we shall shortly be publishing an independent evaluation of their work to date.

But the impetus that has been generated so far needs a much more concerted push. All of us

She may have dropped the 'Lord', but the new President of the Council still inherits Tony Newton's role as the minister responsible for a coordinated drug strategy. Here, for the first time, Ann Taylor outlines her philosophy and reveals exclusively to Druglink readers what to expect from a new strategy

by
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with a stake in society – government, statutory agencies, the voluntary sector, business, the media, local communities, parents and young people themselves – need to work in partnership against the dangers caused by drug misuse. Those dangers range from the obvious health risks to our young people and other vulnerable individuals to the insidious corrupting influence of the drug trade on our streets and in our neighbourhoods. We can only get to grips with these problems if society confronts them with level-headed and collective determination.

Drug czar

This is where the idea of the 'drug czar' comes in. The reason the Prime Minister has given this role such prominence is that he understands the need for real leadership and vision in developing enduring partnerships.

Ministers cannot do this on our own – we need a professional 'mover and shaker', capable of building up our efforts against drug misuse, so that all our resources and skills are working together effectively, both nationally and locally. The 'supremo' will report directly to me, in my role as Chair of the Cabinet's drug coordinating committee, and he or she will work closely with all their colleagues across the drug field. I want this key individual to get to work as soon as possible – consistent with a fair and open selection and appointment process – and we are giving a high priority to ensuring we get the right person for the job, someone who can work effectively right across the board.

A new strategy

Alongside the process of building up partnerships, and ensuring the 'drug czar' hits the ground running, my other priority with my Ministerial colleagues is to start planning a new strategy, based firmly on evidence about what

works. This process needs to be an open and consultative one, and much of the detail will be taken forward by the 'drug czar' in reviewing the existing strategy's impact. I am sure that the general thrust is right – towards greater and more integrated effectiveness in reducing drug supply and related crime, reducing health risks and, crucially, reducing demand among young people. But I am already clear that we need to make substantial progress in a number of key areas.

The drug czar must be able to work effectively right across the board

Targeted interventions

Some groups of people in our society are more at risk from drugs than others. Obviously, education in all its many guises plays a vital role in enabling these people – especially youngsters – to resist or reject drugs.

But we also need to develop programmes which will have the biggest impact on communities where substantial harm is being caused, and where a range of factors are placing young people at particular risk. Alongside DATs and other local groups, the contribution of agencies with special expertise in this area – such as the Youth Service and the Home Office's Drug Prevention Teams – is clearly important.

Drugs and crime

The Home Secretary is taking forward pilot compulsory drug Testing and Treatment Orders for serious drug addicted offenders. We know that big gains can be achieved though diverting such people from the 'revolving door' of the criminal justice system on to treatment programmes that demonstrably work.

The public health and community safety "dividends" are considerable, and I would encourage DATs and other agencies to take up such interventions at all available opportunities from arrest onwards.

Attacking the roots

Drug misuse plainly does not occur in isolation. Studies have shown that while anyone can be at risk from drugs, those most at risk from their misuse often suffer some of the worst social and economic



The new broom: Ann Taylor takes on Newton's mantle but not all his plans

deprivation.

We therefore need to be much clearer about the links between drugs and other forms of substance abuse, drugs and health-related problems (such as mental illness), drugs and the wider environment, drugs and the attitudes and behaviours that can best combat it. This reinforces the central importance of coordination, of tapping into as many relevant policies and programmes as possible so that the resources are available to tackle the real, complex web of problems, not the superficial ones.

Resources

Government has no more a limitless source of funds for this as for any other area. But around half a billion pounds is spent every year, and the scope for attracting additional support from the business and other communities is considerable.

That said, I am not at all convinced that all our existing money is as well spent as it should be – targeting sometimes seems ad hoc and historical, when it should be planned and prioritised, preferably at the point of delivery. And so with my colleagues and the 'supremo', I shall be looking for significant improvements in this area.

I am certain that there is no 'magic wand' out there, ready to wish away the problem

This is a brief rundown of my first thoughts on priorities. But I am going to do a lot of listening over the next few months, as we move towards a new strategy. Like any other social problem in Britain today, drugs misuse represents a challenge for all of us, both collectively and individually. I am certain that there is no 'magic wand' out there, ready to wish away the problem. That applies as much to the legalisation red herring as it does to trite sloganeering.

We must work through this together, calmly and rationally. I look forward to the help I know I will receive from the informed and practical *Druglink* readership to ensure that the framework we develop is a framework which will, over time, result in a steady diminution of the wretched problems caused by drug misuse. ○