

# Headspace

...drugs from the left field

■ by Keith Humphreys

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## Peace pipes

When Dr. Alan Leshner was Director of the US National Institute of Drug Abuse, he used to say that “when those of us in the treatment field feel threatened, we circle the wagons and then fire our guns inward”. Whether or not the UK recovery movement thrives will depend on whether it can avoid this mistake.

For many years, when I gave a lecture or did a media event in the US about one of the recovery-promoting resources I have studied or worked with – Alcoholics Anonymous, Women for Sobriety, SMART Recovery, buprenorphine clinics, faith-based organisations, you name it – I would get angry emails afterwards saying how stupid I was for talking about path to recovery A when the email author had recovered via path to recovery B, the true and only pathway. I felt like I was in the midst of a religious debate rather than in a dialogue about how to promote public health in a pragmatic fashion.

This internecine behavior began to abate in the US in the mid-1990s, spurred on I believe by two events. The first was a National Summit on Recovery in Washington, DC. National leaders in the recovery movement took the risk to stand up in front of their own at the summit, side by side on the podium with others who had recovered ‘the wrong way’. Each said that they embraced their brothers and sisters in recovery regardless of the path they had walked. I still remember that moment and the electricity in the room, as if Middle East peace had at last broken out. It was one of many times of in my life that, as a non-recovering person, I stood in awe of what recovering people can accomplish.

A few years later, Faces and Voices of Recovery was formed as an umbrella organisation for people in recovery and those that support them. From the first, the organisation made a conscious effort to include people who recovered via



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psychotherapy, 12-step programmes, faith-based organisations, medication-assisted treatment or no intervention at all. The result has been that a bunch of squabbling sects have become an important force for sociopolitical change. I doubt that President Obama’s National Drug Control Strategy would have adopted recovery as a central theme if the movement hadn’t gone through its remarkable transformation beforehand and laid the necessary groundwork.

The situation in England now, and to a lesser extent in Scotland, sometimes brings back for me the sadness I experienced when I read all those angry emails. Lines have been drawn and harsh words said, dividing good people who

share a noble mission: helping suffering people turn their lives around. My hope is that this conflictual period is part of a developmental process of movement formation and that in the coming years, national umbrella organisations and individual bridge builders will rise to prominence and unite the warring clans. There are two reasons why this is essential.

First, to state the very obvious, the UK has serious drug and alcohol problems that will be challenging to address even if everyone works together. Second, the drug and alcohol field don’t have many external supporters. If we want to rip each other apart, few people outside of our field will try to stop us or even care; they are more likely to take the opportunity to capture some of our resources. In the current brutal budget environment, those who don’t hang together may end up hanging separately.

*This article is a statement of personal opinion.*