

# The two sides of fear

*Researching government anti-drug campaigns, Arnold Cragg learnt that the appeal to fear is a double-edged sword*

OVER THE PAST DECADE I have helped conduct a dozen or so research projects that have involved talking with young people, and frequently their parents, about drugs and solvents. Typically these projects have been about the development and evaluation of anti-drug abuse advertising. My perspective on drugs as an issue has been shaped very much by the problems of advertising effectively against them, especially against so-called 'soft' drugs.

What I say represents my own views based on several research studies rather than the results of any one study. And I am speaking on my own behalf, not for any organisation.

The young people we talked with in our research have included drug rejecters, the 'at risk', and drug or solvent users. Young people were deemed 'at risk' if they expressed interest in trying drugs, or if they exhibited other behaviours thought to correlate with drug or solvent abuse.

These young people were not known to us personally. All were given an absolute assurance of confidentiality; they knew we would not report their behaviour or opinions to parents, schools, employers or the police. I know from experience that teenagers are a lot more ready to talk with researchers they are never going to see again than they are to talk to their parents.

I draw on these experiences to look at the apparent contradictions and ironies of the drug problem – the way things that seem clear initially have a way of becoming muddled and difficult. There is

This article is based on the text of a presentation given at the Department of Health's drugs conference for parents held on 28 June 1994 in London.

a sharp contrast between the hostility – the simple 'againstness' – most people feel about drugs, and the intractable difficulties in the way of effective action against them.

## **Double-edged sword**

The 'educational' emphasis on drugs as *dangerous* reflects an essential and important truth: drugs make parents and authorities nervous – they are a 'bad thing' – because they carry risks of accident, poisoning, addiction and so on. Young people need to be alerted to the dangers and taught to respect them.

This elementary and obvious strategy has worked for many young people. Young people who reject drugs very often cite fear of dying as the basis for their rejection. They quote cases they personally know of, or have read about in

the papers, where young people have died from abusing drugs or solvents. They do not normally attach the risk to particular drugs; often they say one drug will lead to another, they do not want to run the risk, so the safest course is to avoid all drugs. Occasionally a teenager will cite a different reason for rejecting – that they are simply not interested, or that they have seen other young people 'on drugs' and do not like what they have seen. Overwhelmingly the most cited reason, however, is based on fear: 'If I dabble in drugs, they may kill me'.

Fear of parents finding out is also a significant constraint on some young people. Many teenagers who expressed flamboyant contempt for the law said they dreaded their parents finding out. Some feared they would be expelled from the family home. Others spoke of how let down their parents would feel and how ashamed they themselves would be.

Of course, some of those who cite fear of dying as their reason for rejection may have much more complex reasons for avoiding drugs. They may dislike the people they associate with drug or solvent abuse. They may find the culture of drugtaking intimidating in quite subtle ways. Fear of dying may be cited instead because it sounds like a good reason and an 'argument-clincher' for those who do not want to be more closely interrogated. My feeling, however, is that fear of catastrophe, and especially of dying, is a real deterrent to very many young people. Emphasising the dangers has kept many away from drugs.

But there is another side to fear. If emphasising the dangers has deterred many, *playing on fear* has helped excavate the canyon that separates young drugtakers from their parents and from

by  
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In researching government anti-drug campaigns, interviews with parents and young people suggested that fear of drugs has deterred many young people from experimenting. However, fearful parents feel the only safe line is absolute rejection so are not receptive to information about drugs that does not support this line. Playing on fear and failing to acknowledge the attractions of drugtaking has meant young people in contact with drugs have been distanced from their parents and authority.

# DRUGS

»sometimes the after-effects never wear off



The effects can last forever.

authority in general.

The accent on danger has aroused first the curiosity and then the contempt of many young people. They feel drugs have been ludicrously presented as all equally menacing, equally anathema. Young people with any experience of them at all are liable to see a clear hierarchy of danger. They do not concede that so-called soft drugs lead inexorably to hard drugs. They see friends or acquaintances in abundance who do not seem to be descending a slippery slope, but to be experimenting with impunity and even enjoyment. Many young people despise the notion that one thing will lead to another, seeing it as evidence of how little their parents and authority understand about drugs.

The emphasis on fear *has* effectively established how much parents fear drugs, and how much society disapproves of illegal drug use. In turn this has contributed to the perception of illegal drugs as a 'big deal', something to notice rather than ignore; it has enhanced their status as a 'rite of passage'. Making drugs seem so dangerous has deterred many, but it has also had the effect of staking out territory parents seem afraid to enter, increasing the sense of adventure surrounding drugs, and strengthening the tendency of drug use to bond young people together. The much-maligned 'peer pressure' to take drugs may in part be a creature of our own making.

If you are interested in curbing abuse of drugs it seems quite right to ignore their attractions. Reference to the potential for pleasurable or interesting

Above, the fear arousal approach epitomised in the Department of Health's 1990 campaign. Tactics like this may stymie campaigns to inform parents, as in the right hand poster from the same department's 1986 campaign

sensations would encourage abuse by arousing curiosity and supplying a motive. But the strong and righteous sense many young people have – the absolute conviction – that authority does not know what it is talking about, derives in part from the historic failure to acknowledge that drugs have *any* attractions.

### Anti-drug 'conspiracy'

Lack of reference to the attractions has meant taking drugs has been painted as simply perverse – you'd have to be crazy or bent on self-destruction. Young people who have experimented, or know others who have, almost all regard it as plain wrong to pretend that those who want to take cannabis, speed, acid, or ecstasy are self-evidently 'crazy'. They may associate drugs with 'a good laugh' or an exciting sense of discovery. They may enjoy a strong feeling of bonding. As they see it, taking these drugs may be deluded and mistaken, something to regret in the long run, but, much like getting drunk, not without its satisfactions at the time. It is not a perverse or crazy decision.

That the authorities, as young people see it, neglect the attractions of drugtaking and exaggerate the dangers, has a compound effect. Because they are not believable – obviously not interested and apparently not informed – about the attractions, parents and authority are not believable about the dangers either. So

SHOULDN'T YOU KNOW ABOUT THESE DRUGS? JUST IN CASE YOUR CHILD DOES.



young people are likely to see their friends and peers as more reliable, authoritative and 'expert' on drugs than parents or officialdom. They are liable to feel there is a conspiracy against drugs – a conspiracy to propagate and sustain negative myths which express parents' and society's fear of drugs, but are not well grounded in the realities of the drugs themselves.

A central difficulty with education about drugs is therefore how to express dismay and disapproval whilst keeping in touch with a complex reality – and thereby retaining some credibility.

Many of our studies involved talking to parents as well as to young people. Almost all said they wanted to be better informed about drugs – to be able to

recognise different drugs, and, most of all, to tell if their children are 'on' them. They want the sort of information which will lead to confident detection. That they believe this must be possible is in line with their belief that drugs are so awful, they ought to be readily detectable.

The picture is gradually changing, but it has often seemed to us that parents are too interested in expressing their hostility to drugs to want to learn about them. Parents being interviewed often say they do not know the effects of different drugs. When handed leaflets describing these, they commonly scan them quickly and pronounce them 'not hardhitting enough'.

Parents tend not to want to know things which might soften their hostility to drugs. Many are reluctant to distinguish between drugs because acknowledging that some are more clearly harmful than others involves thinking about a subject many do not want to think about. They want their hostility to be enough. Learning about differences between drugs seems to them to weaken the line of total, absolute, reflexive rejection – NO DRUGS, whatever they are – which is the line they want their children to take, the only line they feel safe with.

In the interests of holding this line, there has been a persistent tendency for parents and authority to refer generically to 'drugs'. This failure to acknowledge differences between drugs is despised by many young people. They see huge differences of all sorts between drugs – what they do, whether they might want to take them, in what circumstances, etc. Referring to 'drugs' strikes users as silly, almost comically naive.

The problem of how to present the issue

## Parents don't want information which might soften their hostility to drugs

of adulteration illustrates the difficulties. Adulteration is a menace with nearly all illegal drugs; the risks are enormously increased by uncertainties about the strength and purity of drugs bought on the street. Adulteration is also a risk which justifies generalisation across drugs; street drugs are generically dangerous because you cannot know exactly what they are.

On several occasions we have looked at attempts to exploit this truth in anti-drug advertising. Users often concede the point. Rejecters too are often impressed, especially with references to rat poison and arsenic as possible cutting agents. But someone will always say – 'Wait a minute, I thought the *drugs* were supposed to be bad for you. Are you saying they would be all right if only they were pure, if only you could be sure there was no rat poison?'

The gap between the generations regarding drugs – the fact that so many young people feel their parents are terrified of any drug, too terrified to learn about them – is very destructive of efforts to curb drug abuse because of the way it contributes to the appeal of drugs as a rite of passage.

We need to rely less on fear as a deterrent and try to generate a greater sense of *contempt* – not, of course, contempt for drug users, but contempt for drugs as a choice. We should hope that our children reject drugs out of comprehensive self-interest – because they *do not want* to take them – rather than just out of fear. It must not seem that we are prejudiced against drugs because we fear them; it must be clear that we recognise taking them as a *mistake*. The movement has to be away from drugs as BIG and BAD towards drugs as A MISTAKE. 'Big and bad' things are shouted about and made to seem significant, 'mistakes' are assessed and understood.

If 'drugs' are an iceberg, dependence and catastrophe are its tip, and there is a massive bulk of non-dependent, non-catastrophic recreational use buoying it up. Turning the torches of our indignation and righteousness on the tip has no helpful effect on the bulk. I doubt if much can be done to shrink the tip without shrinking the whole thing, which requires a considerable change in the culture. We would make a start if we could correct the continuing imbalance in our stance – if our efforts were seen to be more about understanding and dissuasion, less about castigation and lamentation.

### Beyond fear

It would help if a contrast could be drawn between genuine experience and drug experience, so that drug experiences become stigmatised as phoney, as bad tricks, putting a chemical bag over your head. The essential passivity of drugtaking needs to be asserted in a way that will attract contempt: 'You do not do drugs, drugs do you'; 'You are not 'into' acid, acid is into you'. Addiction aside, the short-term effect of many drugs is to change the way people feel in a situation without much changing the situation. Often drugtaking represents an effort to make what is felt to be unsatisfying seem satisfying. We need to try to arrive at a position where young people themselves feel contemptuous of substituting chemistry for the real stuff of life.

This will not be easy and there are no shortcuts. The problem is such that success in rolling back demand for drugs will depend only a little on the size of the budgets dedicated to that end, or how clever our advertising is. It will depend on the big things – on the quality of our relationships with our children (a matter for them as well as us) and on the larger values our society seems to represent – the picture young people form of what life is about and what it has to offer. ○

It's not just governments which have played on fear. These police posters are from the mid-'80s

**GREATER MANCHESTER POLICE**  
**DRUGS MEAN DEATH!**  
 "... it's the only thing addicts can look forward to..."  
 DRUG ABUSE - SOME OF THE TELL TALE SIGNS TO LOOK OUT FOR:  
 PERSONALITY CHANGES  
 GENERAL DECLINE IN APPEARANCE  
 MISSING MONEY  
 SUSPECT SUDDENLY DEVELOPING AN APPETITE FOR BOILED SWEETS  
 SUSPECT DRINKING LARGE QUANTITIES OF SWEET CORDIALS  
 MISSING TEASPOONS  
 MISSING BOTTLE CAPS  
 ALUMINIUM FOIL BEING TAKEN  
 YOUR CHILDREN ???

**GREATER MANCHESTER POLICE**  
**GLUE AND SOLVENT SNIFFING KILLS**  
 POINTS TO LOOK FOR:  
 Glassed look  
 Sores around the mouth  
 Red ring around the nose  
 Smell of glue or chemicals on clothing  
 Apparent drunkenness  
 Inability to stand or walk properly  
 Lack of understanding  
 Irrational behaviour  
 Slow speech and hallucinations  
 EFFECTS:  
 Physical injury - emphysema, judgement and memory become impaired. 'Sniffers' may react to stress by fleeing their home or using the substance to injure.  
 It can also lead to DEATH caused by the removal of oxygen transported as well as the chemical breakdown of the protein in the brain.  
 THE LAW & THE MANUFACTURERS:  
 Glue or solvent sniffing is not illegal in this country and there is no requirement for manufacturers to check the contents of products on the shelves.  
 The products are however used for many innocent purposes and in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, but PLEASE keep them out of the reach of children.  
 Residue from other use is not the same product, only in a well-ventilated room.