

# Drug Scares: the really long term effects

Alasdair Forsyth highlights the role of the academic process in contributing to the media's amplification of drug scares and their enduring effect on policy.

A cartoon by the illustrator Martin Honeysett depicts an unfeasibly large scarecrow being examined by two farmers with the caption "To have any effect I find I have to make it more scary every year". This, I will argue, is the problem facing the journalist and academic trying to make capital from illegal drug use. Their task is easy, so long as there is a constant supply of new (exotic) drugs – in 1977 Robert DuPont, director of the US National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) stated that "Everything people used to say about marijuana is true of angel dust" – maybe, but can this process continue to function in the absence of a new substance to demonise?

## New drugs, new dangers

The origins of drug control in Britain are said to stem from press stories concerning the use of cocaine by women and amongst the forces during WW1. For example:

"The Cocaine Curse – Evil Habit Spread by Nightclubs: Social workers, mental experts and police officials all bear testimony to the ravages of young women, especially of the leisured class that regards itself as Bohemian" (*Evening News*,

14th June, 1916, quoted in Kohn, 1992).

These stories culminated with the commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Edward Henry, writing to the House of Commons on the 20th of July 1916, urging that "To stamp out the evil now rapidly assuming huge dimensions, special legislation is imperatively needed". Eight days later, cocaine was hurriedly banned by being attached to the Defence of the Realm Act (*DORA* 40B).

This took dentists by surprise, whose subsequent committee of inquiry (i.e. research) reported on the 17th of February 1917 that there "was no evidence of any kind to show that there is any serious or perhaps even noticeable prevalence of the cocaine habit amongst the civilian or military population of Great Britain ... apart from a small number of broken-down medical men" (quoted in Spear 2002).

Not only is the above scare the answer to the long forgotten (taboo) question of why/when did drugs become illegal in Britain, but it also serves as a template for subsequent prohibitions, as follows:

- New drug use (usually unproblematic, e.g. by bohemian subcultures).
- A media scare 'exposes' the drug as 'moral entrepreneurs' will quote the media as evidence and the media will in turn quote these 'experts').
- As a result the drug is banned, usually under emergency measures or by being hurriedly attached to unrelated pending legislation.
- Any subsequent research refuting the scare is ignored.
- Following this publicity, use of the drug increases, particularly amongst impressionable or vulnerable groups, leading to their pre-existing problems (e.g. poverty or crime) becoming associated with the drug.
- Research(ers) 'confirm' that the drug is causing these problems and by using the media amplify fears concerning the drug further.
- More action (i.e. funding) against drugs is demanded and taken with dissenting voices being branded as 'soft' or 'irresponsible'.

## New drugs, old dangers

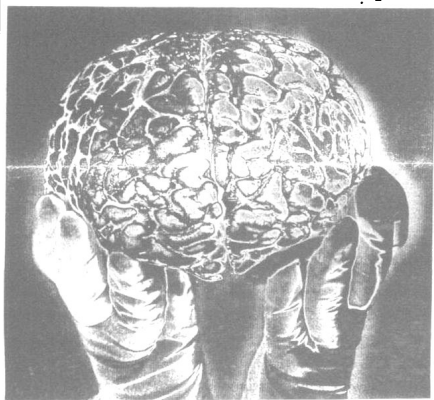
In the US in 1985, media coverage about the 'new' drug ecstasy/MDMA culminated in an episode of the *Phil Donahue Show*, where the future head of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Charles Schuster, commented on unpublished research by George Ricaurte, that

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## Proof positive. Taking Ecstasy permanently alters your brain



The first formal studies using brain scans show that regular Ecstasy users are permanently changing their brains. Isn't that bad news? Well, maybe, maybe not: our brains might take it in their stride, just as they do so much else. Charles Foster, Science Editor, looks at the implications.

The brain scans are the sequel. For the first time, scientists have demonstrated the long-term scars of the "rave" drug Ecstasy on permanently altering their brains. The tough questions now is, are they actually damaged then?

Through the effect of the changes could their users or even children to show up, it is potentially serious news for the UK's estimated 500,000 regular "E" users who could take one or two tablets every weekend. If the brain scans compound for the changes caused by the drug, the long-term effects could include widespread depression and even suicide.

Though until the number sufficient to present still ones' between groups as E!

Dr Ricaurte examined a person's brain to evaluate actions of the nucleus of the striatum which induce a neurotransmitter called serotonin – the "happiness" chemical the central nervous system. The Foster says, though showed differences in all the regions.

Ken McCann, one of the scientists, told the Science magazine that the drug's effects on the brain damage serotonin generate similar to the damage if you're going to use it, do it continuously.

But David Cooper, a deputy editor of *New Scientist* and a PhD in biochemistry pointed out that it is not clear-cut. "The study was just about the effects on serotonin levels. It doesn't say whether they are changed or not. It's just a question of the drug which would in fact reverse their effects." A spokesman for the Environmental Protection Agency commented that "there's no evidence of structural damage".

The knee-jerk reaction to drug reports would be to point to this study as definitive evidence that Ecstasy does damage. Further studies will

indicated MDMA's chemical cousin, MDA, could cause brain-damage in rats. As a result, and despite protests by therapists who had been using MDMA, the drug was placed in Schedule 1 under emergency legislation introduced to combat so-called designer drugs, one of which, MPTP, had recently caused Parkinson's-like symptoms. This led to a myth that ecstasy is a designer drug, therefore ecstasy causes Parkinson's disease.

In October 2002 the journal *Science* published a paper by Ricaurte 'proving' that, used at single recreational doses, MDMA causes the type of damage to dopamine cells in monkeys that can lead to Parkinson's. However, scandal broke in September 2003 when Ricaurte admitted that he had 'accidentally' injected these monkeys with methamphetamine (i.e. speed) not MDMA. Two of the ten monkeys Ricaurte abused with these drugs had died (20% of MDMA users do not die per rave, neither do 20% of speed users). In the months between publishing and retracting, Ricaurte's evidence was pivotal in the passing of the draconian 'Illicit Drug Anti-Proliferation Act' (itself attached to anti-child abduction legislation – the rationale being that both measures protect kids).

The scandal drew attention to Ricaurte's other MDMA research. For example, his November 1997 brain scan (PET) study that appeared to show that ecstasy users' brains had holes in them, also turned out to be fatally flawed. These images were printed on drug education postcards by NIDA and were highly influential in shaping policy and what people think about this drug around the world (NIDA fund 85% of global drug research). The accompanying press release implied ecstasy had 'destroyed' users' brain cells rather than 'damaged' (i.e. altered) their functioning (Walgate, 2003).

**"Proof Positive: Taking ecstasy permanently alters your brain"** (*Independent*, 06/11/97).

**"E's can shatter nerves"** (*Daily Record*, 06/11/97).

**"One night of Ecstasy may bring on Parkinson's"** (*Times*, 27/09/02).

**"Rave Drug Damages Your Brain: Warning over ecstasy"** (*Daily Record*, 01/08/03).

This case highlighted the potential for drug researchers to selectively release information to the media to give a politically motivated message and also the ease by which bad news about drugs can find a home in the academic 'literature'. In the UK the scandal was little reported by the 'tabloids' (e.g. it was not printed by Scotland's biggest seller, the *Daily Record*), though it added to debate within academia about the difficulty of publishing drug research findings that do not report dire consequences.

## Old drugs, new dangers

With no sign of the long-term psychiatric effects for ecstasy predicted in the 1980s and more importantly no 'new' drugs appearing on the scene, what now for the reproduction of drug scares? The solution would seem to lie with portraying old drugs as 'different' (i.e. more dangerous than they used to be).

Fortunately, the downgrading of cannabis from Class B to C seems to have provided the necessary 'new' threat. Today cannabis is different (with exotic names, e.g. skunk) threatening the same long-term effects that ecstasy once did. For example,

# 30,000 TO DIE FROM CANNABIS

## Docs warn as drug use rises

RECORD REPORTER

**CANNABIS could cost up to 30,000 lives a year in Britain, doctors claim today.**

Professor John Henry and a team of colleagues say the death toll will rise because, unlike tobacco smoking, cannabis smoking is on the increase.



as schizophrenia and depression.

It also causes chronic bronchitis, emphysema and other lung disorders, often in young people.

And there are reports of lung, tongue and other cancers in cannabis smokers.

But there is no evidence at present on whether smoking cannabis contributes to the progression of heart disease, as smoking cigarettes does.

Prof Henry said more

one UK expert was quoted in 2003 as stating "It's quite worrying that we might end up in the next 10 or 20 years with our psychiatric hospitals filled with people who have problems with cannabis". This is almost verbatim a quote made about MDMA by his peers 15 years earlier (with an extra decade now added).

**"A Dangerous Edge to Hard Cannabis Use"** (*Scotsman*, 22/01/05)

**"Call to probe cannabis links to mental illness"** (*Scotsman*, 30/01/05)

**"Warning over forgotten drug"** (*Scotsman*, 07/02/05)

**"Can cannabis be a killer?"** (*Scotsman*, 12/02/05)

In Scotland in 2005, cannabis was linked to the high-profile murder of a 14 year-old girl and used as evidence to convict her boyfriend. Despite the fact that the murder took place before re-classification and involved the boyfriend's supposed use of resin, not skunk, this case was linked (together with Marilyn Manson's music) to the current cannabis 'timebomb' by journalists, academics and other anti-drug campaigners, with comments such as "More is being learned about this 'harmless' drug today than in the 1960s. The cannabis smoked then bears little resemblance to that used today. Some of the cannabis dealt in Scotland today has a THC content... much higher than 40 years ago. Nobody who used cannabis then talked about white-outs." (*Scotsman* 07/02/05).

## Same old drugs, same old dangers

In his 1937 cannabis banning testimony to US Congress, Harry Anslinger detailed many violent incidents, similar to the recent Scottish case, concluding: "Marijuana is the most violence-causing drug in the history of mankind", adding that "marijuana turns boys into fiends in 40 days". Today this process takes only 40 seconds – a 2003 US Super-Bowl ad depicted teenagers

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