

# WARNING: MAY CONTAIN NUTTS...

## The price of public interest publication: Nutt-gate

Following the Centre's publication of Professor David Nutt's July 2009 Eve Saville lecture, *Estimating Drug Harms: A Risky Business?*, the Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, welcomed the publication saying:

*It should be self-evident that decisions on Government policy ought to be informed by sound evidence ... science research ought to be contributing a major part of that evidence base. It should be playing a key role in helping us to decide our overall strategies.*

Sorry, that was David Blunkett in 2000, speaking to a gathering of academics. In the real world Professor Nutt lost his unpaid post, five members of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs resigned, and a widespread debate took place in the media about why one of the country's most respected scientists was sacked as chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs when the speech had been previously cleared by the Home Office and was given by David Nutt speaking in his capacity as a Professor at Imperial College London. The Centre held a public meeting attended by 400 people where Professor Nutt explained events from his perspective. This video can be found on the Centre's website as can *Estimating Drug Harms: A Risky Business?*

Regular readers of *cjm* will now be used to the government taking against an evidence base that does not concur with current criminal justice policy. Given similar treatment to Professor Nutt were the academics at the LSE who were given a hard time by the government because of the problems they had identified with the national ID card scheme. In a number of the Centres' publications Professors Rod Morgan, Tim Hope, Reece Walters, Ed Cape, and Lee Bridges have also pointed to serious problems with the uses of research by government.

There were two concrete results of the Nutt affair. First, on 15 December as part of a government review ordered to take the steam out of the issue, Lord Drayson, who had 'been abroad' when the key events occurred, published a consultation on principles on scientific advice to government which met with a luke-warm reception.

Second, on 15 January 2010, Professor Nutt, with the help of the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, established the Independent Scientific Committee on Drugs (ISCD). The Committee, which is filled to the brim with scientific experts of all types that any government would be delighted to have in the fold, will hold its first meeting in late April and get on with the job.

It is important to note, despite some media reporting, the ISCD does



not see itself as 'a rival' to the ACMD. The ISCD is a body focused on the science and will deliver clear independent information about the science into the public arena. Les Iverson, the interim chair of the ACMD was quoted in the Daily Telegraph describing his role and the ACMD in the following way: 'I'm not the drug adviser to the government, I'm a spokesman for a large group of people on the advisory council, only a few of whom are scientists.' (Daily Telegraph, 13 January 2010) The distinction is clear enough. Having a body dedicated to the research and not inhibited by government qualms in reporting findings that are in the public interest will be seen by many as a significant step forward.

Whatever the composition of the next government, one can only hope that when a Minister of State argues that 'Government policy ought to be informed by sound evidence' they really mean it. ■

### Risky people or risky societies?

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies has published a three part series exploring policy challenges affecting young adults in trouble with the law. The first, written by the Centre's director, Richard Garside, critiques the government's reliance on identifying 'risky' individuals for targeted interventions. The second, by Dr James McGuire of the University of Liverpool, challenges the view that coercive interventions can be effective. The third paper, also authored by Garside, will be on social justice approaches. The series forms part of the Centre's contribution to the Transition to Adulthood Alliance, established by the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

Visit [www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications.html](http://www.crimeandjustice.org.uk/publications.html) for more information.