



THINKING THE 'UNTHINKABLE'

Police drug strategies

The Metropolitan Police in London are currently reviewing their strategy in respect of drug abuse. The nature of policing and the nature of problem drug use make this a peculiarly difficult area to analyse and a rehearsal of the concerns and issues is timely.

Policing covers everything. Everything that can turn into a crisis or emergency; everything that may turn into a disaster for someone; everything that requires help or advice; everything that involves the law; everything that is that might disturb "... The Queen's peace, her crown and dignity". Policing involves everything from lost kittens to kidnapped children. Policing starts with prevention measures, not just crime prevention but disaster prevention. One person's disaster is another's hiccup. A disaster for a six year old is different to a disaster for a 76 year old.

Now map that description of policing onto drugs, the ACMOD 'DISC' model helps the analysis. Problem drug use can turn on the drug itself, on the individual user, on the situation in which the drug is taken, on the culture in which the use occurs. In a multi-cultural society this latter makes an already vastly complex series of inter-relationships infinite in their possibilities. There can be marked local variations not just in scale but in proximate causal relationships. These can be geographic and can change in the space of a few streets.

Towards a policing strategy

The policing activities need to be set into a strategy, by which I mean a decision making process about the scope of our activities, about the allocation or re-allocation of major resources, about matching those activities to our current resource capabilities in a changing environment in the light of our values, stand-

ards and goals. To quote the Commissioner, Paul Condon it's about "making hard choices".

There is some help available in making these choices about police activities. First, there is a government drug strategy. The drugs problems are divided into production, supply and demand issues. The government strategy identifies analytically distinct roles and modes of activity for the Home Office, DHSS, courts, hospitals, probation service, social services, the non statutory sector, customs, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and of course the police themselves.

The problem solving is not helped by the messy nature of the issues and the uncertainty about the results we are expected to obtain. Are we all together expected to stop the abuse of drugs? That is the implicit if difficult goal from the published strategy. The problem is messy because the police are involved not only at all three levels of production, supply and demand but also with every agency. Police activity starts with citizenship classes in schools, with involvement in health education packages, through involvement with local initiatives at divisional level against groups of dealers or users, on estates or in public houses, through to the Regional Drug Advisory Committees, up to the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, beyond our shores to the posting of police officers as drug liaison officers in the producer nations. Policing is the only craft that embraces the entire drug structure from a six year old's health education to a 76 year old courier for the dealers. The police therefore have a vast amount of information available to other parties about the scope of the problem.

A good day for the police is a day that the problem does not get any worse. Those days are few and far between. The police strategy is to co-operate with anyone else who is concerned to contain the

problem whilst at the same time contributing to education programmes. So the strategy embraces the role of drug liaison officers in producer nations trying to reduce the supplies available for distribution. It embraces tackling the transportation networks. It embraces tracing the vast sums of money across the world, helping the customs intercept those supplies, dismantling the infra-structure of over-lapping supply networks disrupting dealing, discouraging purchase by increasing risk of arrest, contributing to education, and reducing the impact of drug related crime.

Old Problems: New Solutions?

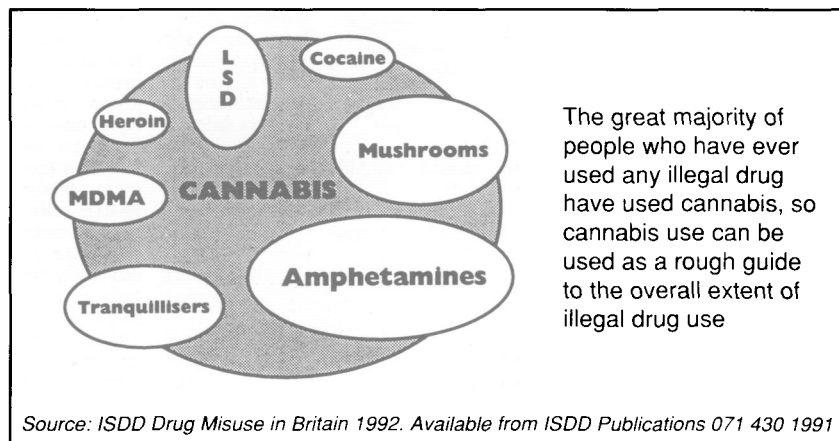
It is within this vastly complicated context that recent attempts to look at new solutions have occurred. Thinking the unthinkable has ranged from a National Drug Education Unit, national cautioning policies and drug referral schemes to having a real war on drugs. There is much talk of war as an analogy but war means the total mobilisation of society; it means imposing policy by force. It means burning children in napalm on the 10 o'clock news and flag draped boxes in village churches.

One way of tackling the problem might be to undermine the acquisitive or criminal base on which drug purchases are derived. The vast sums of money that fuel inter-dealer status and violence in a paranoid treacherous environment are the product in some cases of thousands of burglaries: thousands of burglaries by the same criminals who are arrested again and again.

Government strategy embraces prescribing drugs to some people on medical grounds in an attempt to stop their use but in many cases for maintenance, that is control. Decisions are made on medical grounds for reasons of social policy; it is possible logically to argue for similar decisions made about other kinds of problem drug users. A reduction in burglary, a reduction in profits, a reduction in violence might give the police and society breathing space to help education policies bite. We might see more days when the problem did not get worse.

However, that is hypothesis. What is needed is research to see if such a strategy would really work and undermine the dealers. This would not mean approval, or decriminalisation or legalisation. It might mean that, as in the existing medical policy, some people might be licensed to supply or use some or many drugs because of the nature of their and society's problems.

Commander John Grieve, Metropolitan Police



The great majority of people who have ever used any illegal drug have used cannabis, so cannabis use can be used as a rough guide to the overall extent of illegal drug use

Source: ISDD Drug Misuse in Britain 1992. Available from ISDD Publications 071 430 1991