

History and the Future of Psychoactive Substances – summary

People have used psychoactive substances for centuries, but policies towards drugs and their users have varied across time and place. History raises important issues about the best mix of policy responses to drugs. The past also illuminates the way in which new drugs are received. It is common for them to be welcomed initially, when they are often seen as replacements for more dangerous drugs, only to be categorised later as harmful and addictive in their turn.

The Foresight project on Brain Science, Addiction and Drugs asked Virginia Berridge of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and Tim Hickman of the University of Lancaster to analyse historical insights for the future of psychoactive substances.

They point out that attitudes to drug use are a function of wider economic and social factors. Very high levels of alcohol consumption became less acceptable with the spread of factory work and the need for work discipline in the industrial revolution, while the consumption of opiates by the rich was seen in the 19th century as less of a problem than their use by Chinese sailors in east London or by factory workers. In the United States, cocaine was unfairly associated with black people and with fears about black people. Such fears still determine responses to drugs today.

As new drugs appear, such as morphine, codeine and cocaine in the 19th century, Valium in the 1960s, and ecstasy in the 1990s, they emerge into a society which already has its own ideas about drugs and drug users. Morphine and cocaine were originally regarded as treatments for addiction, not causes of it.

Technology

Technology and innovation have been an important factor in changing attitudes to drugs. It made alcohol and tobacco more available: smoking spread after innovation in cigarette manufacturing. It has also led to claims that new forms of drugs could be used more safely than old ones. One example is the introduction of the hypodermic syringe in the 1860s, which was initially seen as a safer method of administering morphine.

Controlling drugs nationally and internationally

Drug policies have been put in place not just because of patterns of drug use but because of the economic and social interests involved. In the 19th century, opiates were widely used and were regulated through pharmacists. There were stronger economic interests involved in alcohol and tobacco and so controls were different.

Drug 'problems' arise in political, economic and social contexts, including the international dimension. Psychoactive substances have been traded internationally for a long time and international attempts to control opiates, but not alcohol, are a century

old. After the Second World War, under US influence in particular, the international approach moved to greater prohibition.

Habit or addiction?

Until the late 19th century, drug users had a 'habit', perhaps analogous to gluttony, rather than being 'addicts'. During the 19th century, theories of disease came to be applied to both alcohol and to drugs. These linked medicine with temperance movements. Addiction is a concept whose application varies between substances and over time and place. For example, the idea of addiction to tobacco has only become significant recently.

Lessons for the future

In theory, policy can move in opposite directions. On the one hand, it can in practice encourage greater consumption of some drugs; on the other, it can take a strongly negative approach towards consumption based on the harmful effects of use.

The balance between policy responses and culture has to be carefully managed to avoid unduly driving use underground and amplifying harm for users. A balanced policy for new drugs would be best, with the government holding the ring between all the interests involved, including industry. Clear scientific and media messages about drugs are important influences.

Government could think of developing policy in stages, so that different policies are introduced at different points in a process of cultural change. Currently, there is cultural change towards lessening the use of some legal substances such as tobacco and policy both reflects and reinforces this.

Groups in society such as women and young people are often singled out as having particular risks, as evidenced in the recent debates on women and 'binge drinking'. This focus could run a risk of ignoring wider problems in the rest of society.

The drugs of the future are likely to be synthetic ones, which may be marketed as 'cleaner' and are easier to use than traditional drugs. But, as with opiates in the 19th century, they may come to be seen later as more of a problem. The availability of replacement pharmaceutical or plant substances, under medical or lay control, plays a role in containing harmful use.

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