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2 Marsham Street, London SW1P 4DF
www.homeoffice.gov.uk

Professor David Nutt
Chair
Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

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The Government has previously asked the ACMD for advice by means of individual requests. However, I believe that it will benefit both the ACMD and the Government to adopt a more structured approach to the way in which we ask the ACMD for advice.

Following consultation with the Department of Health, I set out below the key areas that I would like the ACMD to consider and integrate into its future work plan. I would be grateful if you would discuss these proposals with my officials, confirm if they are achievable and provide a timescale for delivery.

Early warning mechanism

While we already have monitoring and alert systems in place via the Serious Organised Crime Agency and Department of Health's Central Alerting System, the ACMD has a central role to play in identifying emerging threats from new drugs or new risks through changes in drug use. I am keen to ensure that this activity is undertaken on a systematic basis, with a longer range and international focus.

As part of that work, I would like the ACMD to consider how it could improve the current system of information flows into it, and the data sources it draws from. A more robust early warning system would enable advice to be given in real time, maximising the ACMD's contribution to the identification of emerging threats and enable us to take swift pre-emptive action.

"Legal highs"

The ACMD provided advice on benzylpiperazine and its related compounds last year; and my department are taking steps to bring these under the control of the 1971 Act in line with your recommendation. I am also aware that my

officials have discussed with the ACMD Secretariat our concerns about “spice”, a mixed product that reportedly contains a variety of plant/herbal ingredients but has recently been found to include a cannabinoid receptor agonist. I would be grateful for the ACMD’s advice on this and other associated products at the earliest opportunity.

I am concerned that there is a wide and largely unregulated market in the sale of psychoactive legal alternatives to illegal drugs, particularly as they are actively marketed to young people in “headshops” and via websites. Advice on the availability and harms of these so called “legal highs”, with a particular focus on protecting young people, will be very useful in informing future Government policies.

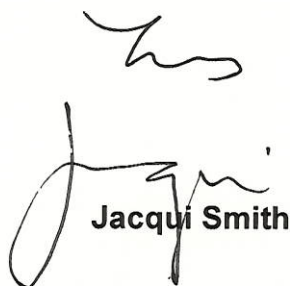
Cognitive enhancers

Following the findings of the Foresight project, the Academy of Medical Sciences (AMS) Report *Brian Science, addiction and drugs* made a number of recommendations around this class of psychoactive substances. The AMS identified a role, together with others, for the ACMD in increasing our understanding of the harms of these drugs, including possible developmental issues, psychological dependence or addiction. The AMS also raised the issue how best we regulate cognitive enhancers. I would like the ACMD to take an active part in these considerations and advise the Government accordingly, especially as to how we keep pace with this rapidly evolving field.

Poly drug use

Poly drug use is a matter raised with my officials when they visit treatment centres of every modality and, as your recent report on MDMA states, there is a great deal of uncertainty about changes in levels and styles of poly drug use. Poly drug users are often the most at risk and are those with the most complex needs. The *2008 Drug Strategy* committed the Government to target those users most at risk through new approaches to drug treatment and social re-integration. I would, therefore, be grateful for your advice on the issues raised by poly drug use and what the appropriate responses are.

I hope that this letter clarifies the Government’s priorities for the coming year, and provides a framework within which we, and the Advisory Council, can continue to work together to further reduce the harms caused by drugs.


Jacqui Smith