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Professor Les Iversen
Chair, Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs
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8 July 2014

Dear Professor Iversen,

THE USE IN LEGITIMATE RESEARCH OF PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES LISTED UNDER SCHEDULE 1 TO THE MISUSE OF DRUGS REGULATIONS 2001 (INCLUDING SCHEDULE 1 NEW PSYCHOACTIVE SUBSTANCES)

Last year the Home Office undertook a scoping exercise to assess whether controlled drug legislation is impeding legitimate scientific research in the UK, following concerns received from a limited number of research professionals. I am writing to provide you with a summary of the exercise's outcomes, including action we are taking in response.

The scoping exercise was targeted at a cross-section of the scientific community, including the main research bodies. Our analysis of the responses confirmed a high level of interest, both generally and at institution level in Schedule 1 research. However, the responses did not support the view that Schedule 1 controlled drug status impedes research in this area. While the responses confirmed Home Office licensing costs and requirements form part of a number of issues which influence decisions to undertake research in this area, ethics approval was identified as the key consideration, while the next most important consideration was the availability of funding.

The majority of respondents did not also consider that the level of controlled drug licence fees restricts valuable research in this area. This provides some reassurance but we are not complacent and remain open to considering new evidence, if and when available, which links Schedule 1 status to limited research, including action we might take to continue to support valuable research in this area.

One of the key outcomes of the exercise was that it revealed the lack of familiarity with the licensing regime and requirements. About half of all respondents reported they were not familiar with these requirements probably because they have not applied for a licence before. As part of our commitment to continually improve our services to licensees, the Home Office Drugs and Firearms Licensing Unit (DFLU) have already taken steps to make the licensing application process more intuitive through a new on-line application portal. This includes 'help text' information specific for Schedule 1 research licences, and the facility to upload supporting documentation – such as research protocol and ethics approvals – to streamline the process. Website content, which outlines the application process and associated licence fees will be reviewed and DFLU would be happy to provide information to incorporate in any university or research organisation publications to demystify the licensing process.

You will be aware that the Government has a strong commitment to promoting research, and it is not intended that legislative provisions aimed at protecting the public from the harms of drugs should impede valuable research. We are glad that this exercise has prompted the improvements in the process as detailed above. We will continue to give further thought to what more we might do to support research in this area.

I have written to all respondents to outline the outcome of the scoping exercise and action we have taken in response to the exercises' findings. I am also copying this letter to Sir Mark Walport, the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Bernard Silverman, the Home Office Chief Scientific Adviser and Professor Dame Sally Davies, the Department of Health's Chief Scientific Adviser.

I hope you find this information useful.

Yours sincerely,

Daniel Greaves
Head of Drugs and Alcohol Unit