

# Drugs: Time for a Rethink

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**A** recent article in *The Economist* told us that a kilo of heroin, 40 per cent pure, sells on the streets for up to US\$290,000 and that import prices are about 10–15 per cent of retail in rich countries. The more successful the authorities are in restricting supply—either by capturing shipments or scaring off illicit drug traders—the wider ‘the wedge’ between import and street prices becomes and the greater the potential profits. Australian authorities cite the recent hike in the price of illicit heroin as evidence of success, but such success is necessarily its own substantial undoing—it increases rewards for smuggling or manufacture, and causes addicts to take even more desperate measures.

It is virtually inevitable that such huge profits will be employed in their own preservation, by corrupting the enforcement authorities and influencing the political system. This happens in legal industries with far smaller margins of profit. Think of how the motor industry tried to preserve its ‘wedge’ by regaling us with the horrors that would be associated with reduced import restrictions. The horrors never did eventuate, but their improbability didn’t stop the motor manufacturers. And even at the height of protection, cars sold in Australia for only about half as much again as they could be imported, whereas drugs sell for six or seven times import parity. The last thing the drug barons want is a policy that removes ‘the wedge’. In my political days I marvelled at how quickly and generously the case against drug liberalization could be financed.

The heroin or cocaine addicts’ cravings must be awful when they are prepared to rob old ladies and prostitute themselves. (I don’t accept, as some are wont to claim, that many of these

people are shameless.) The safe injecting rooms being tried in NSW address only one of several problems: death through overdose.

When no less an authority than the chairman of the National Crime Authority argues that attempts to restrict supply are doomed to fail, and that we therefore should experiment with giving addicts lawful access to the drugs they crave, he deserves a better hearing than our Prime Minister gave him. I accept that any policy change involves risk, but so does burying one’s head in the sand. Let’s look at the public policy options, for those who are not yet addicts, and for those who are.

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Drug dealers’ long-term profits depend on new addicts. It beggars belief that they would do anything significant to prevent the sale of their wares in (to take the most horrible example) schools, unless it were made unprofitable for them to do so. The death penalty might raise their costs to the point of unprofitability, but in no country where the death penalty applies for trafficking has the trafficking stopped. I don’t see that as an option.

At whatever level of supply, tomorrow’s demand for addictive drugs would be reduced if non-addicts were discouraged from experimenting. To this end, governments could add further

state-imposed punishments to the well-known potential clinical costs of using the various illegal drugs. It is, however, the experimental user, not the addict, who would need to be punished. Gaoling would probably be counterproductive. There is not a single goal in Australia where drugs do not gain access; and, in any case, the trend seems to be away from punishing for possession of drugs for personal use. The government, fortunately in my view, hasn’t the stomach for anything draconian, and so let’s forget that option too.

What, then, about the more subtle punishments of social disapproval and conscience? People crave approval and are much influenced by the attitudes of the company they keep. The drug problem might be seen as but one of several consequences of an attitudinal trend that people of my age (65) and a bit younger once accepted or even encouraged. In the 1960s, confusing liberalism with licence, many of us disparaged personal responsibility and gratification deferral, saying in effect that ‘if it feels good, do it now’. In the 1970s, we consciously abandoned our behavioural ideals and replaced virtues with mere values. In the 1980s, we began smothering even moral debate under a blanket of political correctness. And in the 1990s and beyond, if we don’t personally reap the whirlwind of being perpetually worried about drug-addicted children and grandchildren, then we have friends and acquaintances who do.

Our long-term hope must lie with reversing what Gertrude Himmelfarb has called ‘the de-moralization of society’. Abandoning moral discrimination didn’t work, and we must rebuild those institutions that we once dared to call virtues. But that is a long-haul task. What is more, acceptance of personal responsibility is a virtue that

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any government (and especially the current one) is ill-equipped to advise upon. A Cabinet with a time horizon that seems to stop at the next election, and which squanders the budget surplus by bribing voters, simply does not have the necessary standing to be influential. Since we wouldn't want its standards to become community standards, the less it says directly about either prudence or responsibility, the better. It might, nevertheless, fund others to 'educate' the not-yet-addicted about the consequences of drug taking. However, not too much should be expected of that policy either. Such programmes are genuinely difficult to pitch appropriately, are prone to takeover by those who hold the values that have contributed to the problem, and are greeted with cynicism by their targets.

Neither rebuilding institutions nor education can materially help the already addicted, from whom comes the vast bulk of the current demand for illegal drugs. They are given medical and psychological help, and the substitute drug methadone, through the healthcare system. Although there is good objective and published evidence (from both Australia and the US) that methadone programs reduce crime, methadone does not seem to be a close enough substitute to reduce sufficiently the demand for street heroin.

There is no closer substitute for an illegal product than the same product supplied legally. Government has the options here of simply removing the wedge between import and street prices by decriminalizing supply, or of greatly reducing the wedge by supplying addicts with cheap drugs of higher quality. The drugs might still reduce users' average life-spans, as nicotine does, and reduce physical and mental capacity, as alcohol does, but, if provided by either lawful means, sudden premature death and nearly all of the social side effects, especially the crime, could be greatly reduced. Not just the addicts would benefit. Surprisingly, prolonged use of pure opioids does not have the deleterious health effects of alcohol on the brain or of tobacco on the lungs or

circulation. Used medicinally, heroin is a very safe drug.

There are three strands of opposition to the legal provision of highly addictive drugs (nicotine aside). One is that the effectiveness of anti-drug education would be undermined—'all the wrong messages would be sent'. Another is that if a drug were readily available to addicts, then more people would be prepared to risk addiction. And the third is that some addicts, once given legal and cheap access to their

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drug, would not attempt abstinence. None of these counter-suggestions is simply erroneous, but the consequences of each are easily overstated.

The first, I believe obvious, point about 'all the wrong messages' is that the state is only one source of leadership and instruction concerning personal behaviour; and, except to the extent that it resorts to punishment, it is not a very effective one. Even for the person who looks to government for moral guidance, the link between allowing addicts access to the drugs (which are used medicinally anyhow) and condoning their use for their psychotic effects is tenuous. Governments license the provision of alcohol and gambling facilities, and even use them as a revenue source, but do not thereby admit to encouraging drinking and gambling.

If addicts knew that they would not be condemned to lives of shame and such rapid self-destruction, then more might risk addiction. I accept as much, but I doubt that many experimenters are so coldly rational. Moreover, even though premature death and the need

to resort to crime and prostitution are partially effective deterrents, are they deterrents that the state is entitled to employ?

Governments should, wherever possible, avoid precipitous changes. This is not merely because any course may, with hindsight, prove wrong, but also because both the authorities and the public learn to live with the existing institutions. So let's also put across-the-board decriminalization to one side. That leaves supplying addicts by a controlled means. If undertaken on sufficient scale, the policy should almost totally eliminate 'the wedge'. If undertaken with sufficient care, the predicted adverse incentives could almost be avoided. The incentive for dealers to recruit new addicts would be all but eliminated. I'm normally no advocate for the counselling fad, but drug addicts' problems are not molehills to be turned into mountains. Might it not be a good idea to offer them a drug supply that comes with counselling?

The risks associated with supplying the addictive drugs (or even initially just the opiates) at known and sterile dosages only to registered addicts, and only when they attend registered premises, seem trivial beside the potential benefits. Such a policy should prevent several overdose deaths and a good deal of disease, much crime and much hard living. By taking (much of) the profits that keep the dealers in business it would reduce the size of 'the wedge', making the measures that raise the cost of drug dealing more effective. The policing of the illicit drug traffic and penalties for dealing need not be abated.

People's attitudes would not be rescued by this or any other government policy. In some circles, especially late at night, passing delights do not seem as silly or immoral as at other times, and peers are likely to disparage common sense. To ask a government to fix that problem is, however, akin to pissing into the wind. It is *our* task.

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