

Swallow the truth: We're a nation of pill-poppers

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All the evidence is that the vast majority of us enjoy drugs of one kind or another - it's just that some are politically acceptable and others are not.

The Government didn't agree with the scientist they appointed to advise them on dangerous drugs, and forced him to resign.

The cause of the row was a paper Professor David Nutt wrote highlighting what he called the 'artificial' separation of alcohol and tobacco from the debate about harmful drugs.

You might ask why politicians seek expert advice, and then ignore it. Most of us can't understand the way that illegal drugs are classified anyway - it seems totally arbitrary.

Recently both cannabis and ecstasy were upgraded against the advice of the panel of experts chaired by Professor Nutt.

In the end, our drug policy seems to be about scoring political points, and not about a need to protect the public.

Overall, you could argue that our drug laws have failed - not one person fewer uses illegal drugs in 2009 as a result of Home Secretary Alan Johnson's confused policies, which even senior police officers agree are unworkable.

Rather than obsess about illegal drugs and whether ecstasy is more or less harmful than horse-riding, the Prime Minister and his ministers should be far more concerned by the fact we've become a nation addicted to legal drugs, courtesy of the millions of prescriptions for tranquillisers, and antipsychotic drugs dished out by the NHS.

It's estimated that up to one million people are addicted to prescription drugs, and as a measure of their concern, the NHS began a review into prescribing levels last July, but the details have not been made public.

In 1988 and again in 2004, doctors were advised not to prescribe more than four weeks' worth of these drugs, but has that had any effect?

In 2008 an astonishing 11 million prescriptions were issued for tranquillisers, and tomorrow in the House of Lords, Lord Montagu will try to get the NHS to disclose how it plans to cope with the current crisis.

He will reveal that a close family member is suffering dreadfully as they try to combat their addiction to legally prescribed tranquillisers - with the NHS and local services providing nothing in the way of support.

Add to the problem of addiction to prescription drugs the estimated 32,000 people who are said to be addicted to painkillers containing codeine, which are sold over-the-counter, and you can see the scale of the problem.

Doctors dish out highly addictive drugs, but not the help to deal with the chronically debilitating side-effects of withdrawal. If that isn't bad enough, we are breeding our prescription drug addicts even younger.

According to figures obtained recently under the Freedom of Information Act, 420,000 prescriptions for tranquillisers and other highly addictive mood-altering drugs were issued to children under 16 in 2007, an increase of 33 per cent in two years.

There's been a 51 per cent increase in the number of prescriptions for these drugs issued to 16 to 18-year-olds. Altogether, around 100,000 young people under 19 are on drugs for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), a condition that was not recognised three decades ago.

While some of these children might well require medication, I refuse to believe that addictive drugs are the only way to treat hyperactive kids. Surely diet, family setting, physical activity and teacher/child ratios all play a part.

Instead of demonising Professor Nutt, the Government should take a look at how the NHS is (quite legally) turning us into a nation of pill-poppers.