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Lancet Editorial ACMD (17 April 2010) response - From the UK Drug Policy Commission:

Dame Ruth Runciman (Chair)

Professor Colin Blakemore (UKDPC member)

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Your editorial ("A collapse in integrity of scientific advice in the UK", April 17, 2010) looks forward to the outcome of Sir David Omand's review of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) as a solution to the breakdown of confidence between scientists, experts and policy makers. We believe that such broad expectations are over-optimistic and that a more fundamental review of the governance and leadership of drug policy in the UK is now needed.

The ACMD was, until recently, the principal vehicle through which government and parliament sought independent advice for drug policy, and that advice was respected and followed. In this respect, the Misuse of Drugs Act of 1971 provided a model for the development of evidence-based policy. However, great change has occurred over the last few years.

In 1998, the government experimented briefly with the appointment of a 'Drug Czar'. One of the unintended consequences of this was an undermining of the contribution and role of independent scientists and experts.

We have seen drug policy increasingly influenced by media pressure, sometimes hysteria, and by the ideological and polarized opinions of campaigning organizations and others, often based on flimsy evidence.

Successive governments have tacitly acquiesced in this shift from evidence to opinion by not building an adequate evidence base along with suitable machinery and structures for independent scrutiny and evaluation. This has been commented on recently by the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee.[1][2]

This changing pattern of influence has eroded the provision of objective advice for the development and implementation of drug policy. In effect, policy has become dominated by ideological rivalries. The mechanisms for building consensus through commitment to objective evidence and rigorous evaluation have been undermined.

The Misuse of Drugs Act will be forty years old in 2011 and it is time to look afresh at the governance arrangements for drug policy. Over the next eighteen months, our Commission will carry out a serious review of drug policy governance and stewardship in the UK. We need to examine, as the Phillips Report did for food safety, how expert analysis, public opinion, political strategy, economic and social factors might be more transparently and rationally integrated.

Our initial view is that an effective mechanism to deliver effective and better 'governance' of drug policy would have a number of essential ingredients including:

- * Solid investment in developing the evidence base to inform drug policy analysis and decision making.
- * An independent mechanism and body for the evaluation and scrutiny of policies.
- * Inclusive and transparent methods, machinery and structures to take account of public opinion and 'political' considerations, against a background of the best scientific evidence and expert advice.
- * Enhanced political accountability through Parliament and devolved bodies.
- * Clear and open reasoning that people can understand and hold to account.

After the election, the government will have an opportunity to reflect on recent events and make a fresh start in strengthening the overall governance of drug policy, rebuilding the processes, structures and practices, so that a new consensus about the aims and directions of drug policy can be created. We hope that the work of the UK Drug Policy Commission can facilitate this much-needed review.

Ends

Ruth Runciman was a member of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (1974 – 95). She was also Chair of the Independent Inquiry into the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 (1997-2000)

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[1] 'Tackling Problem Drug Use', Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, HC 297, Session 2009–2010, National Audit Office

[2] 'Tackling Problem Drug Use', House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, Thirtieth Report of Session 2009–10, HC 456