



Amanda Feilding

Reforming Psychedelic Science and Policy: An Update from the Beckley Foundation

AMANDA FEILDING

THE BECKLEY FOUNDATION HAS HAD a very successful year, with much progress on our dual fronts of Science and Policy.

In January the *Beckley Foundation–Imperial College Psychedelic Research Programme* published two ground-breaking scientific papers on the effects of psilocybin on cerebral blood flow and brain activity, using brain-imaging technology correlated with subjective reports. The findings reveal how psilocybin decreases blood flow and thereby diminishes the activity of a network of key “hub centres,” which are responsible for filtering and coordinating information. By decreasing this censoring activity, psilocybin allows a freer, less constrained state of consciousness to emerge.

One of the “hubs” deprived of blood flow by psilocybin is known to be *overactive* in chronic depression, a condition characterised by rigidly negative thought patterns. By lowering the activity of this “hub,” psilocybin may allow the excessively rigid negative thinking to be reset. On the back of these findings, the UK’s Medical Research Council has awarded a substantial grant to investigate the potential of psilocybin in the treatment of depression. It is a major breakthrough for a psychedelic study to receive government funding.

We also found that another “hub” centre, which is *overactive* in cluster headaches, has its activity reduced by psilocybin. This finding lends neuroscientific support to the anecdotal evidence that magic mushrooms and LSD can provide effective relief for this agonising condition.

The second paper, published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, details how psilocybin produces extraordinarily vivid and lifelike memories in comparison with placebo. The results highlight the valuable potential of psilocybin as an aid to psychotherapy in enabling the subject more easily to access, and therefore work through, traumatic memories.

A third Beckley/Imperial psilocybin paper has recently been published in the *Schizophrenia Bulletin*. Our results show

that the changes in connectivity between brain regions brought about by psilocybin resemble those seen during meditation and early psychosis: The networks responsible for *inner focus* and *external attention*, normally acting in opposition to one another, become more closely coupled. This can result in a blurring between “inner” and “outer” worlds in all these states—for example the “ego-dissolution” and “unitary state of awareness” reported both after taking psychedelics and in the mystical state.

Another Beckley/Imperial study, into the neural basis of the effects of MDMA, was televised in September on Channel 4 in the UK and watched by over two million people. In response to *positive* memories, MDMA was found to *increase* the response of the brain’s sensory cortex. By contrast, during recall of *negative* memories, brain areas associated with *negative* emotions—such as the amygdala—showed *decreased* activity under MDMA.

This observation provides a neuroscientific explanation for the success that MAPS has reported in using MDMA-assisted psychotherapy in posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When memory recall is less traumatic, patients can more easily engage with, and work through, their traumatic memories.

In the coming months, we plan to continue the Beckley/Imperial collaboration with brain imaging research on LSD and cannabis, for which protocols have been prepared.

Another Beckley study, in collaboration with Johns Hopkins, is the first in modern times to use a psychedelic as an aid in the treatment of addiction—in this case, to nicotine. Although the trial has had only a handful of participants so far, its findings to date have been amazing, with all the participants remaining long-term abstinent. The study has recently benefitted from funding from the Heffter Research Institute, enabling it to develop more rapidly to the next phase.

Our research into the neuroscience and therapeutic effects of cannabis is also moving forward. A Beckley study in collaboration with Harborside Health Center in California and



University College, London is producing a unique database on the medical efficacy of different strains of cannabis in relation to their different chemical compositions. This will provide a valuable resource for future clinical research, as well as evidence for policy-makers.

Our long-running collaboration at King's College London investigating the different characteristics of THC and CBD has produced much valuable data, such as showing that CBD counteracts the effects of THC, reducing both the paranoia and the memory impairment that THC can induce. Further results recently published show that CBD can counteract symptoms of prodromal psychosis. High-potency street cannabis tends to be high in THC, with little or no CBD—precisely the combination that can have the greatest potential for harm. With a regulated market, content could be labelled.

Our programme of psychedelic research is not only opening up new avenues of treatment, but also shedding new light on the mechanisms underlying consciousness, arguably the last and greatest mystery for mankind. Substances that alter consciousness as profoundly as psychedelics are vital for this research, yet only very recently has any systematic investigation become possible. Even now, progress is throttled by a cumbersome prohibitionist regime that shuts out all but the most determined searchers. The Beckley Foundation is proud to be at the forefront of this research.

The Beckley's Policy Programme is also making exciting progress. In July, at the invitation of President Otto Pérez

Molina, we opened a *Latin American Chapter* in Guatemala. The Chapter is advising the President and his Government on drug policy matters, including developing a sophisticated range of policy options aimed at reducing violence and corruption

in Guatemala and the wider region.

In late 2012 we are to launch a new global campaign website, in partnership with the *Global Commission on Drug Policy*, Virgin

United and Avaaz, to coincide with the release of the film *Breaking the Taboo*. The campaign, whose Mission Statement is the Beckley Public Letter, will aim to collect over a million signatories calling for an end to the War on Drugs. The Letter (printed on page 38) has already been signed by eight Presidents and twelve Nobel laureates.

We have also just released a major new report, *Roadmap to Reforming the UN Drug Conventions*, which details how a group of countries could set about amending the UN Conventions to allow them the freedom to formulate national drug policies better suited to their special needs and circumstances, in place of the failed prohibitionist approach of “one size fits all.” 🌐

Amanda Feilding is Founder and Director of The Beckley Foundation. She can be reached at beckley@beckleyfoundation.org.

Founded in 1998, the **Beckley Foundation** aims to scientifically investigate altered states of consciousness, and to change global drugs policy to reflect a more rational, evidence-based ideology. To learn more, visit beckleyfoundation.org.

THE GLOBAL WAR ON DRUGS HAS FAILED IT IS TIME FOR A NEW APPROACH

WE THE UNDERSIGNED call on Governments and Parliaments to recognise that:

Fifty years after the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs was launched, the global war on drugs has failed, and has had many unintended and devastating consequences worldwide.

Use of the major controlled drugs has risen, and supply is cheaper, purer and more available than ever before. The UN conservatively estimates that there are now 250 million drug users worldwide.

Illicit drugs are now the third most valuable industry in the world, after food and oil, estimated to be worth over \$350 billion a year, all in the control of criminals.

Fighting the war on drugs costs the world's taxpayers incalculable billions each year. Millions of people are in prison worldwide for drug-related offences, mostly personal users and small-time dealers.

Corruption amongst law-enforcers and politicians, especially in producer and transit countries, has spread as never before, endangering democracy and civil society. Stability, security and development are threatened by the fallout from the war on drugs, as are human rights. Tens of thousands of people die in the drug war each year.

The drug-free world so confidently predicted by supporters of the war on drugs is further than ever from attainment. The policies of prohibition create more harms than they prevent. We must seriously consider shifting resources away from criminalising tens of millions of otherwise law abiding citizens, and move towards an approach based on health, harm-reduction, cost-effectiveness and respect for human rights. Evidence consistently shows that these health-based approaches deliver better results than criminalisation.

Improving our drug policies is one of the key policy challenges of our time. It is time for world leaders to fundamentally review their strategies in response to the drug phenomenon.

At the root of current policies lies the 1961 UN Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs. It is time to re-examine this treaty which imposes a 'one-size-fits-all' solution, in order to allow individual countries the freedom to explore drug policies that better suit their domestic needs.

As the production, demand and use of drugs cannot be eradicated, new ways must be found to minimise harms, and new policies, based on scientific evidence, must be explored.

Let us break the taboo on debate and reform. The time for action is now.

Yours faithfully,

President Otto Pérez Molina
President of the Republic of Guatemala

President Jimmy Carter
Former President of the United States, Nobel Prize winner

President Fernando H. Cardoso
Former President of Brazil

President César Gaviria
Former President of Colombia

President Vicente Fox
Former President of Mexico

President Ruth Dreifuss
Former President of Switzerland

President Lech Wałęsa
Former President of Poland, Nobel Prize winner

President Alexander Kwasniewski
Former President of Poland

Jaswant Singh
Former Minister of Defence, Minister of Finance, Minister for External Affairs (India)

Thorvald Stoltenberg
Former Minister of Foreign Affairs (Norway), UN High Commissioner for Refugees

Louise Arbour, CC, GOQ
Former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

George P. Schultz
Former US Secretary of State

Mario Vargas Llosa
Writer, Nobel Prize winner

Dr. Kary Mullis
Chemist, Nobel Prize winner

Professor Sir Harold Kroto
Chemist, Nobel Prize winner

Professor John Polanyi
Chemist, Nobel Prize winner

Professor Kenneth Arrow
Economist, Nobel Prize winner

Professor Thomas C. Schelling
Economist, Nobel Prize winner

Professor Sir Peter Mansfield
Physicist, Nobel Prize winner

Professor Sir Anthony Leggett
Physicist, Nobel Prize winner

Professor Martin L. Perl
Physicist, Nobel Prize winner

Wisława Szymborska
Poet, Nobel Prize winner

Dr. Jan Wiarda
Past President of European Police Chiefs

Carel Edwards
Former Head of the EU Commission's Drug Policy Unit

Javier Solana, KOGF, KCMG
Former EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy

Professor Noam Chomsky
Professor of Linguistics & Philosophy, MIT

Bob Ainsworth, MP
Former Secretary of State for Defence

Peter Lilley, MP
Former Secretary of State for Social Security

Lord MacDonald, QC
Former Head, Crown Prosecution Service

Nicholas Green, QC
Former Chairman of the Bar Council

Sir Peregrine Worsthorne
Former editor, Sunday Telegraph

Professor Peter Singer
Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University

Professor David Nutt
Former Chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

Professor Sir Partha Dasgupta, FRS, FBA
Professor of Economics, Cambridge University

Professor Niall Ferguson
Professor of History, Harvard University

Dr. Muhammed Abdul Bari, MBE
Former Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain

General Lord Ramsbotham
Former HM Chief Inspector of Prisons

Professor Lord Piot
Former UN Under Secretary-General

Sir Richard Branson
Entrepreneur, founder of Virgin Group

Sting
Musician and actor

Yoko Ono
Musician and artist

Bernardo Bertolucci
Film Director

Carlos Fuentes
Novelist and essayist

Gilberto Gil
Musician, former Minister of Culture, Brazil

Sean Parker
Founding President of Facebook, Director of Spotify

Maria Cattai
Former Secretary-General of the International Chamber of Commerce

John Whitehead
Former Chairman of Goldman Sachs and US Deputy Secretary of State

Professor AC Grayling
Master, New College of the Humanities

Professor Sir Ian Gilmore
Past President, Royal College of Physicians

Lord Rees, OM
Astronomer Royal and former President of the Royal Society

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