

New ways with drugs

Legalizing hard drugs, but controlling them, could lessen the social evils of drug abuse.

NARCOTIC drugs, by general consent, constitute an unparalleled social evil, but nobody can decide what should be done about them (and it). In the United States, where politicians during the election months ahead will be competing for the sympathy of anxious parents and social workers by advertising their willingness to deal firmly with drug traffickers, the issue has now been further dramatized (and confused) by the inevitable rapid spread of AIDS among those injecting heroin intravenously.

One measure of the common despair over drugs is the proposal that the US armed services should stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the US Customs Service in an attempt to keep out drugs by force — interdiction is the word. Continuing alertness is no doubt essential, but surely a problem as serious as that now identified in the United States deserves more radical remedies. Is there a chance that the hapless intravenous drug users infected with the AIDS virus may provide the spur?

Sadly, the elements of the problem of drug-taking in prosperous societies are now all too familiar. On the supply side, drugs have been for decades a continual source of violence and corruption. Over the years, all kinds of stratagems have been tried, and have failed, to interrupt supplies at their source, in South-East Asia, Turkey and Latin America, for example: paying one farmer not to grow poppies may merely provide an incentive for his fellows to follow the same route. Interdiction, subtle or by armed force, no doubt serves as a deterrent for some who traffic in drugs, but has the effect of maintaining the street price of what is sold, increasing the financial burdens lying on the drug users. All this is well-known, as the piteous consequences of addiction, social and pharmacological. What can be done?

To note that much of what is now done by way of remedy is paradoxical is not, by that means, to complain; the difficulties are too great, and the consequences of failure too serious, for that. But there is a curious irony in the practice of the health authorities in many large cities of providing intravenous drug users with an ample supply of hypodermic needles so as to abate the spread of AIDS. The practice, of course, is a sensible means of protecting drug users from an even greater catastrophe, yet implicitly it is tantamount to condoning criminal activity. And a year after the clamour in the United States for the random testing of corporate employees for pharmacological signs of drug usage, it is still not clear whether the practice does more good (deterrence) than harm (ostracism for those in need of social help). Nobody would pretend that there can be a simple solution, but disquiet about drugs does require that elements of a remedy should have consequences that are predictable.

That is one reason for listening attentively to the case for going some way towards legalizing drugs, even heroin and cocaine. The principle would be essentially that followed in the care of the handful of heroin addicts in Britain until the 1960s — declared addicts would be provided with supplies from official sources at a cost they could afford. The obvious and immediate benefit is that the huge profits now obtained from the drug trade would be quickly and drastically curtailed, as would be the steady stream of drug-related crime. A further benefit would be that drug-users would at least be accessible to persuasion that a course of treatment would be worthwhile. The obvious difficulty is that societies would be seen to condone practices now firmly classified as criminal. Theoretically, at least, there is also a danger that a supply of cheap drugs would increase the number of those dependent on them, especially if the system were so loosely administered that supplies intended for declared drug-users were diverted onto a black market.

While it would be rash to claim that such a system could be made to function in present circumstances, the chance that it might cries out for serious study. No doubt it would ironically

emerge that state narcotics monopolies would have their work cut out to wean a substantial proportion of drug users away from their present sources of supply (which would, of course, remain illegal). Drug users would not willingly declare themselves, and might fear for the long-term security of their supplies or, more immediately, compulsory cold turkey. An essential component of such an arrangement would be legislation requiring that declared users would not be discriminated against in employment except to the extent that their performance is marred by drugs. Another is an understanding there will be funds for the generous support of drug-treatment clinics. If drugs are as much of a menace as they appear, can it seriously be said that the cost of cure is too high? □

We wuz robbed

Blood is now being spilled differently in British universities, making institutions lop-sided.

SOONER or later, it had to happen that some long-suffering head of a British university would break with the conventions of academic civility and complain publicly of having been robbed. Dr Eric Ash, the rector (equivalent to vice-chancellor, president or chancellor) of Imperial College, London, is a man of equable temperament, so that his protest last week that his Earth science department has been lumped, by the University Grants Committee (UGC), with the goats and not the sheep, carries extra weight. But what the quarrel (see page 489) signals is the emergence of a contradiction in the running of universities that has been on the cards for the past three years. After five years of confusion caused by the general shortage of funds, uncertainty has given way to an understanding that university resources for the prosecution of research would be concentrated on departments with international reputations.

Earth science departments are being tackled first (see *Nature* 332, 101; 1988) only accidentally. Philosophy has already been rationalized, but the serious ructions will come next year with UGC's decisions about the research prospects of mainstream science departments latterly hard-pressed to fill student places. The essence of the contradiction is that the policy of concentrating university research resources on departments of high reputation is a reasonable way of apportioning inadequate resources within the existing British framework. That comes about because grant-making agencies reckon that universities will themselves cover the overhead costs of project research. But the policy is also, inevitably, one that limits the freedom of universities to mould themselves in their own lights. Ash's protest boils down to saying that an institution such as Imperial College must surely be incomplete without a substantial research programme in the Earth sciences. Who, in fairness, will say that he is asking for more than the head of a substantial science-based university is entitled to expect?

In reality, the only way in which clashes of this kind could have been avoided would, preferably, have been to have started from somewhere else or, alternatively, to have changed the framework in which British universities operate. For the past eight years, there have been more institutions than the funds available could adequately support. Allowing some of the weaker institutions to go to the wall would have been a solution, but in the British system would have required unpalatable political decisions. The merging of institutions, another solution, has proved uncommonly difficult (partly because of academic snobbery). But the pattern now in prospect of institutions which are lop-sided in ways they find intolerable is at once inequitable and unstable. The hope must be that, now that they can see the writing on the wall, they will defend themselves by seeking potential merger partners — and that the government will recognize that its schemes for centralizing control of the universities will saddle it with a host of uncomfortable problems in the years ahead. □