

of the leading opposition party, the Conservatives, which vigorously supported Nutt's sacking, has no merit at all. It deals a significant blow both to the chances of an informed and reasoned debate over illegal drugs, and to the parties' own scientific credibility.

Nutt's fate was decided following the publication last week of a thoughtful analysis of the challenges in estimating the harm done by drugs (see go.nature.com/dPiUAt). In this paper, for example, Nutt notes that public perception is highly influenced by the way the media cover dramatic events such as drug deaths. He goes on to analyse such coverage over a decade. The data show that the media have disproportionately highlighted the comparatively small number of deaths caused by drugs such as cocaine and MDMA compared with the far more numerous deaths caused by other substances, such as alcohol.

The imbalance has convinced the public — and politicians — that some notorious drugs are much more dangerous than they are. Such perceptions heavily influence the government's classification of substances under the Misuse of Drugs Act, which in turn determines the penalty for being found in possession of a given drug.

Nutt goes on to detail efforts to develop an evidence-based scheme that ranks drugs according to “nine parameters of harm”, which range from an individual drug user's ravaged veins to society's extra

payments for health care. The harm ranking that results bears only an approximate resemblance to the official classification. For example, alcohol and tobacco, which don't fall under the Misuse of Drugs Act, rank considerably higher than MDMA, which is classified as among the most dangerous drugs.

That scheme has no official standing, unfortunately. But in describing it, Nutt attempted to do what he has done in many other public discussions: portray risk in terms that people can understand, look at the underlying factors that influence scientific and public debate, and thereby highlight how politicized discussions about drug use have become. To Johnson, this was apparently tantamount to “lobbying” against political decisions.

Thus the sacking. As *Nature* went to press, two members of Nutt's former committee had resigned in protest against the government's intolerance. They were right to do so. The government, meanwhile, badly needs to restore its credibility on this issue. One good way to do that would be to follow Nutt's suggestion to turn the advisory council into an independent body reporting to parliament as a whole, not to any individual official. An independent, scientifically run drug-regulation system would also free politicians from having to politick over who is toughest on drugs, something that would spare them and scientists much unnecessary future trouble. ■

140 years on

Nature's birthday offers an occasion to reflect on the past and look to the future.

Nature's first issue appeared on Thursday 4 November 1869. 7,269 issues later, a little bit of satisfaction may be in order given that the journal has survived wars (during which publication was suspended at least once) and, so far, the Internet's onslaught on traditional models of publishing. *Nature's* papers are highly cited for what seem to us to be good reasons. Lots of people (millions online every month) want to read the journal. So where do we need to be self-critical? Readers will no doubt have many answers, but here are a few.

One is that we need to keep an eye on, and even counter, the way in which *Nature* is used or abused by others.

Throughout its history, and certainly over the past few decades, *Nature's* goal as a journal has been to publish papers that make deep and broad impacts in and beyond the natural sciences. We have pursued that goal in a spirit of vigorous independence. Because *Nature's* editors are free from any association with societies or editorial boards or immediate commercial imperatives, we have always made the final call on what should be published. It is not unknown for us to override the negative recommendations of three referees about a technically valid paper because we believe it to be more interesting than any of them perceive it to be. The responses of the community and the citations generally seem to have validated our judgements.

But others sometimes put more weight on our judgement than it can justifiably bear. Large grants, philanthropic donations and personal chairs have been awarded on the strength of a paper in *Nature* — in effect, using editors' decisions as a surrogate for

independent judgement. This is an abdication of the decision-makers' responsibility, and is a pitfall to be avoided.

On a related note, we take no pleasure in the fact that researchers feel oppressed by the need to publish in the 'top journals'. We endorse efforts to create systems that reach beyond the crudeness of the impact factor — systems that make transparent the citations and other effects of papers, and that record impacts of scientists' other work, such as their contributions to databases and the hard slog of peer review. We will develop our own systems to make such subtler credits easier to account for, and will collaborate with others working towards that same end.

Nature's role as a journal is complemented by its role as a science magazine. We have enhanced our journalism and externally authored opinion in recent years, and readers can anticipate further developments ahead. One example has been the introduction of a columnist. In this issue, we bid a sad farewell to David Goldston, who has been writing in these pages about the intersection of science and policy since January 2007. His Party of One column has been an essential read for US policy-makers since its debut, and earlier this year he garnered honourable mention in the US National Association of Science Writers' awards for 'The scientist delusion', his column about religion (see *Nature* 452, 17; 2008). Building on the success of Goldston's column, *Nature* will shortly introduce two new monthly columnists.

Most fundamentally, *Nature* has to reflect the values of its authors and readers. The core values of science — objectivity, independence, self-critical thinking and a relentless urge to observe, experiment and explore — are also important principles of good journalism and editing. As an unusual hybrid of magazine and journal, *Nature* can only retain readers' respect if it follows those principles while adding substantial value to the lives and work of researchers and others seriously interested in science. Our commitment to fulfil these ambitions is as strong as it has ever been. ■