Testy debate:

Biomarkers for prostate cancer stir controversy

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2009 in review:

We take a look back at the past year's headlines

Nutt dismissal in Britain highlights diverging drug views

At a time when the US government has signaled a softer stance on medical marijuana, the dismissal of an independent drug advisor in Britain has highlighted the UK's hard-line stance on illegal substances.

David Nutt, until recently chair of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD), was fired by UK Home Secretary Alan Johnson on 30 October. The sacking followed the issuing of a press release relating to a lecture on drug risk and classification that Nutt gave in July at King's College London.

In his lecture, Nutt criticized the lack of evidence for the current classification of drugs in the UK and claimed that this undermined the credibility of the official message on drugs. He cited cannabis as a case in point: "[y]ou are 20 times more likely to get lung cancer if you smoke tobacco than if you don't. That's the sort of scaling of harms that I want people to understand. There is a relatively small risk for smoking cannabis and psychotic illness compared with quite a substantial risk for smoking tobacco and lung cancer."

Cannabis had been downgraded from a class B drug to class C by the Labour government in 2004; however, it was raised again to the more restrictive class B category in 2009, against the advice of the ACMD.

Nutt, who works at Imperial College London and the University of Bristol, had previously clashed with Johnson's predecessor

Jacqui Smith over a paper Nutt published in January on perceptions of risk that compared 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA, or 'ecstasy') use to horse riding (*J. Psychopharmacol.* 23, 3–5; 2009).

Public dispute

In a statement, Johnson claimed that Nutt's comments "damage efforts to give the public clear messages about the dangers of drugs." Nutt, however, has hit back in a series of interviews attacking the Labour government's approach to the issue of drugs.

As *Nature Medicine* went to press, no less than five members of the ACMD had resigned in protest of Nutt's dismissal. The Home Secretary has also taken flak from other leading scientists and scientific advisors, who produced a statement of Principles for the Treatment of Independent Scientific Advice, since then backed by the country's current science minister Lord Drayson.

In addition, a leaked email from Drayson revealed he was "pretty appalled" by the sacking, which he regarded as "a big mistake." Drayson later confirmed the veracity of the email and said he was "now focused on the future and making sure we have a reaffirmation of the importance of independent scientific advice."

Johnson and Nutt have both been asked to present their version of events to the House of Commons cross-party science committee.

However, some members of the committee notwithstanding, both main parties seem united over the correctness of sacking Nutt.

Chris Grayling, the Conservative Party's shadow home secretary, said after the sacking that "Professor Nutt's comments earlier this year, comparing the risks of ecstasy with those of horse riding, were particularly ill judged. The issues that the council deals with are highly sensitive, and there are very divergent opinions out there, so there is a clear responsibility to

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Speaking out: David Nutt

act cautiously and be mindful of the fact that messages given by official advisers can and will influence the behavior of the public."

Shifting attitudes

Both Labour members and the Conservatives have backed tough stances on drugs. In an opinion piece after his sacking, Nutt claimed the UK was "falling out of step with international trends" as a result (*New Sci.* 204, 5; 2009).

One example of this, cited by Nutt, is that on 19 October the US Department of Justice announced it would not seek to pursue people using marijuana for medical reasons in states where such use is legal. This represents a notable reverse of the previous policy.

More recently, the American Medical Association reversed its previous stance by calling for a review of marijuana's classification as a Schedule I drug—the most restrictive category—in the US Controlled Substances Act.

Daniel Cressey, London

AFP PHOTO/Jewel Samad

New perspective: Under Obama, the US has softened its stance on medical marijuana