

ACMD

Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs

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Rt Hon Jacqui Smith
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31st March 2009

Dear Home Secretary,

Thank you for your letter of 13th March 2009 in which you set out the Government's priorities for the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) for the forthcoming year. I am pleased that I have now had chance to present these to Council members and discuss how we may best deliver the advice. Overall, the Council were very receptive; the consensus was that the communication of your priorities to the ACMD can only serve to ensure that we provide advice on issues that are most pertinent to you.

The ACMD would be pleased to provide advice on each of the areas that you outlined. I have set out below a summary of each of these and a very brief note on our early consideration. I would welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your officials to discuss further detail and timelines and will use the opportunities I have meeting with your Ministerial team to update them fully.

Early Warning Mechanism

ACMD members have links to existing international and national systems and structures that provide surveillance of trends in drug use both in the UK and globally. We have arranged for a small working group of the ACMD to fully explore how we best collate and exploit the evidence gathered and best provide timely information to Ministers and officials of emerging/new drugs and associated risks.

Legal highs

The ACMD will set up a working group to develop advice on 'legal highs' with a focus on protecting young people. In particular, the ACMD is concerned about the increasing use of the drug product 'Spice' a herbal preparation with added synthetic cannabinoids. I intend, very shortly, to send you early advice relating specifically to this product.

Cognitive enhancers

The Academy of Medical Sciences report (*Brain Science, addiction and drugs*) was thorough in its consideration of the psychoactive substances termed 'cognition enhancers'. The ACMD will, through a working group, provide you with an assessment of their harms and associated issues.

Poly-drug use

The ACMD believes that this is a particularly important issue (as noted in many of our reports) as this is very often the way that drugs are taken and the situation that drug treatment agencies and workers are faced with on a daily basis. We will convene a working group to tackle this subject which will, of course, also consider alcohol and tobacco.

Other advice

The Council has now considered its wider work plans in addition to the work you have requested above. I can confirm that the ACMD is minded to postpone further reviews of individual drugs currently in the classification system until such times as you request a review, or when we believe that there is a clear requirement to provide advice to you. Of course, we will continue to provide advice on the classification of 'legal highs' as outlined above, as we have done in past (for example for Benzylpiperazine).

You will wish to be aware that we are currently engaged in a process of developing the way in which we structure and assess the evidence that underpins the advice on classification we provide. At our most recent meeting we worked with Professor Larry Phillips of the London School of Economics whom is an international expert in Multi Criteria Decision Analysis. The aim of this work is to continually improve the way we provide advice, ensuring it is embedded in a transparent framework of an assessment of harms. We will continue to ensure that your officials are fully apprised of our work and welcome their input as we develop our thinking in this area.

The ACMD is also considering reviewing the evidential base for optimal treatment approaches for drug users in support of the government's current harm reduction strategy. I will keep you informed when we have considered this issue further.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet and discuss any of these issues with you. The ACMD is extremely grateful for the support and information your officials continue to provide us at our meetings and I would like to reaffirm that they and ministerial colleagues are always very welcome to attend our Council meetings – the next full Council will be on the 14th May.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Nutt', with a stylized, wavy flourish extending to the right.

Professor David Nutt FMed Sci