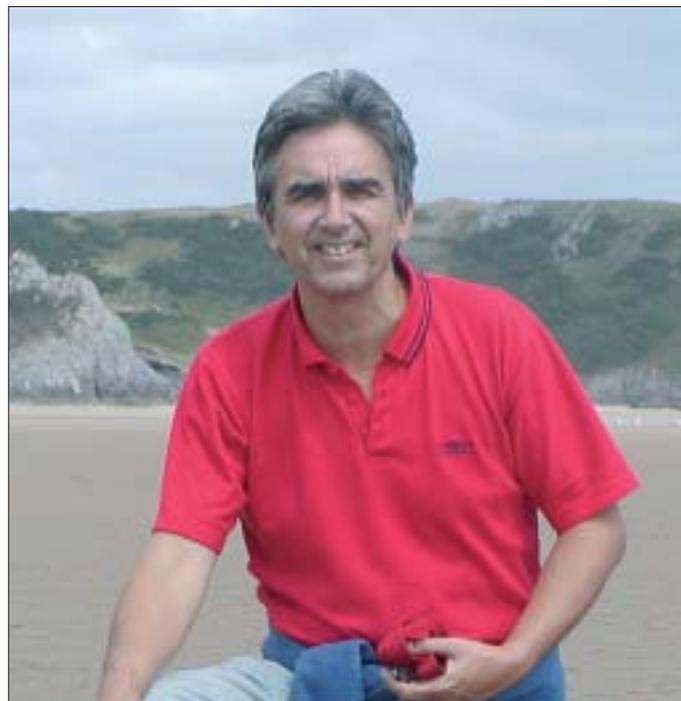


Drugs in society

How can we make a rational decision about whether drugs are good or bad, when we're all drug takers?

Professor David Clark takes the definition of a psychoactive drug right back through history, and reveals how politics, economics and the media all play their part in shaping people's attitudes. Society will only make progress when it learns to address substance issues openly and realistically, he suggests.



'The sufferer is tremulous and loses his self command; he is subject to fits of agitation and depression. He loses colour and has a haggard appearance... As with other such agents, a renewed dose of the poison gives temporary relief, but at the cost of future misery.'

From a medical textbook published in 1909. (See end of article to discover the drug.)

People have been taking psychoactive drugs to change their state of consciousness for thousands of years. Man has discovered psychoactive drugs serendipitously, has cultivated them deliberately, and has been producing them in laboratories, even in suburban homes.

Many people consider that only a minority take psychoactive drugs. However, in his excellent book *Living with Drugs*, Michael Gossop points out that drug taking is 'almost a universal phenomenon, and in the statistical sense of the term it is the person who does not take drugs who is abnormal'.

While some people might react strongly to the idea that they are a 'drug taker', drugs come in various forms other than illegal substances such as heroin and cocaine: nicotine in cigarettes, alcohol, and various prescription drugs used for problems such as sleeplessness, depression and anxiety. Even tea and coffee contain a drug – caffeine.

So what is a psychoactive drug? The World Health Organisation defines a drug as 'any chemical entity or mixture of entities, other than those required for the maintenance of normal health (food), the administration of which alters biological function and possibly structure'. A psychoactive drug is a drug that affects the brain to produce alterations in mood, thinking, perception and behaviour.

The positive effects of psychoactive drugs are the pleasurable mood states they induce and their ability to reduce negative mood states such as anxiety. However, psychoactive drugs may also produce negative effects, such as the paranoia and delusions

caused by excessive use of amphetamine.

Society has clung to the notion that some psychoactive drugs we use are 'good', whereas others are 'bad'. Heroin is a 'bad drug' and heroin users are often classed as deviant or abnormal. Tea and coffee are 'good' drugs – although most people do not consider them as drugs. Alcohol is a 'good' drug, even though we are becoming increasingly aware of the risks that can be associated with its misuse. Tobacco is rapidly shifting from being a 'good' drug to a 'bad' drug.

Librium and valium, which can be obtained on prescription to alleviate anxiety states, are considered 'good' drugs. This situation is complicated though, because these same drugs become 'bad' drugs if used by people who also take heroin or amphetamine. Librium and valium are also known to be addictive.

The 'good/bad' drug distinction sometimes becomes synonymous with 'safe/dangerous'. Society would have us believe that good drugs are all safe, or at least relatively safe, whereas bad drugs produce bad effects and are not safe. However, as Michael Gossop points out, it is here that society has problems, because 'scientific questions about the actual effects of a particular drug become entangled with issues of personal morality and subjective beliefs'.

It is important to note that the 'good/bad' and 'safe/dangerous' classifications have varied across time, and from culture to culture. Some drugs which are illegal today were commonly used in the past legally, often for medicinal purposes. Some drugs deemed illegal in Western society are used for religious purposes in other cultures.

It also needs to be emphasised that the 'safe/dangerous' distinction does not hold up to scrutiny. Many more people die, either directly or indirectly, as a result of using tobacco, alcohol and prescription drugs than all illegal drugs combined.

Throughout history, societies have developed laws to regulate or control the use of certain drugs. One

would like to believe that these laws have developed objectively, in an attempt to reduce the health and social problems caused by drugs. However, a closer look reveals a more complicated picture – ideological, political and economic interests play a major role.

People in society today have a set of attitudes towards drugs and drug taking, that are often shaped by the popular media. As Gossop points out, 'the term "drug taker" is used as a condemnation, as a way of identifying someone who is involved in a strange and deviant way of behaviour. There is a continuing reluctance to face up to the fact that drugs and drug takers are part of everyday life'.

We live in an inconsistent society. On the one hand, we tell our young people not to take drugs and keep away from people selling drugs. On the other hand, doctors and others are constantly encouraging us to take drugs produced by the pharmaceutical industry – some of which are addictive – for a variety of conditions. Moreover, while we tell young people that certain illegal drugs are dangerous for their health, we ignore to a large extent the bad effects that alcohol has on health.

Psychoactive drugs have always been part of life – and they will always be present. Substance misuse is not going to go away. Society needs to recognise the problems caused by substance misuse and deal with them in a realistic and open way. We also need to recognise that many problems caused by drugs are intimately related to other factors, such as social deprivation and social exclusion. Society needs to address these problems.

The drug is coffee!

Michael Gossop's book *Living with Drugs* is essential reading for people interested in learning more about psychoactive drugs. It can be obtained from Amazon books for £17.99.