

Andy makes a number of fair points about my editorial, but I think to some extent misses its point. The issue I was raising was not that ecstasy is not dangerous, it clearly is, but that alcohol is considerably more dangerous than one might be led to believe from its wide use, heavy marketing, etc. etc.

Whereas we have only suggestive data on the dangers of ecstasy in relation to brain damage, road traffic accidents, violence, work performance etc we have – and have had for years – proof that alcohol is hugely deleterious in those areas. It is true that the dangers of ecstasy may have been unknown or overlooked by those who use it, and indeed the potential toxicity of ecstasy might make it unlicensable if it were to be found to have therapeutic utility (e.g. in psychotherapy). However the same is true of alcohol, but arguably more so, and the fact that alcohol is legal and ecstasy not is merely an historical accident, not a science-based decision. Alcohol undoubtedly kills thousands more people each year than ecstasy – and even if ecstasy was used to the same extent I would argue that this would still be true. The randomness of deaths from ecstasy is worrying – but not as worrying as the fact that each weekend around ten young people in the UK will die of alcohol poisoning or intoxication-related incidents.

The main point of my article was to argue that until we get users and regulators to view alcohol as a potentially lethal DRUG rather than a drink/foodstuff/commodity/innocuous social lubricant this damage from alcohol will not be ameliorated. Many relatively ill-informed and indeed innocent young people will continue to die and many more will end up with the destructive consequences of alcohol dependence or physical damage. If the same effort currently used to deter ecstasy use was put towards reducing alcohol misuse the situation might improve. Indeed the recent report from the House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology (2006) argued similarly that alcohol and tobacco should be seen as important reference drugs in any discussion of the relative harms of illicit drugs.

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Reference

House of Commons Select Committee on Science and Technology (2006)
Available online at: <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmsctech/1031/103102.htm>