



A year in headlines

From preparing for a new drug strategy and battling with budgets, to getting problem drinking taken seriously, there was plenty to write about in 2007.

DDN looks back over the year.

January

Weak commissioning, patchy prescribing, black holes in care planning and spasmodic service user involvement were highlighted by the Healthcare Commission and the NTA in their survey of substance misuse services across England. Up in Scotland the *Sunday Herald* declared 'the political addiction to tough talking has failed us all', warning against 'a bidding war of hard-edged rhetoric and simplistic solutions'.

Dire stories of America being ravaged by methamphetamine prompted Home Office minister Vernon Coaker to announce an upgrade to class A, and the 'severest penalties' for users and dealers.

Public health minister Caroline Flint kept budget speculation to a minimum, by announcing an overall increase in the pooled treatment budget at the start of the year. Funding would be more fairly distributed among areas this year, which meant there were winner and loser DATs. The NTA promised to work with areas with cuts to make sure their service delivery was not jeopardised.

February

Some good work on *Hidden Harm* was being hampered by lack of specific targets on child protection and welfare, an ACMD audit concluded.

The BMA warned that prison health care was sliding towards crisis. Four out of ten prisoners had used illegal drugs at least once in prison and staff had little chance of tackling dependency while struggling with scant resources and a burgeoning prison population.

Scotland's misery at having double the alcohol death rates compared to the UK as a whole was underlined by latest statistics, which showed older men most at risk.

Tier 4 capital funding was announced – a 1.1 per cent reduction on last year's budget – but was still hailed by Caroline Flint as 'a clear sign that that drug treatment remains a key priority for government'.

FDAP launched a programme of competence-assessed qualifications and resources – part of a drive to help

DATs and services meet NTA/Home Office workforce development targets that gathered momentum throughout the year with the activities of the newly formed Competence Group (CoG).

March

A radical rethink of drugs policy was proposed by the RSA, following its Drugs Commission's two-year study. Labelling a policy that focused on criminal justice 'no longer fit for purpose', it called for strategy to centre on health and social support and to embrace harm prevention and reduction.

Current A, B and C divisions should be scrapped so that drugs could be classified by the harm they do, according to an expert panel that published a league table of harmful drugs in the *Lancet*. Surprise, surprise – Alcohol and tobacco beat cannabis, LSD and ecstasy to the top of the table.

A revamp of Scottish drug education strategy was announced. Research had indicated that existing teaching was not necessarily having any impact on children's behaviour.

As anonymous pharmacies from all over the world continued to spam us, The International Narcotics Control Board drew attention to the fast-growing scourge of prescription drug abuse, which had surpassed heroin and cocaine in some parts of the world. The public 'are putting themselves at significant risk of ill effects, not least because of the increasing quantity of counterfeit products entering the market,' added DrugScope's Martin Barnes.

A Euro-poll reminded us that the UK are among worst binge drinkers, while British cannabis cultivation soared to record highs.

April

The UK Drug Policy Commission sprang into life to provide independent and objective analysis of drug policy. 'We don't know enough about which elements of policy work, why they work and where they work well,' said Dame Ruth Runciman, chair of the charity, which is funded for the next three years to fill the gap in evidence-based research.