

Review of the year

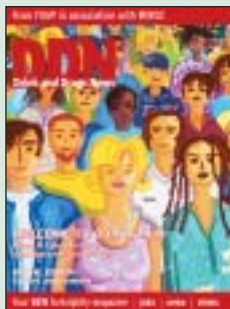


January

The year the licensing laws change begins with wrangling between ministers and warnings about boozed-up Britain's runaway binge-drinking culture. While Prime Minister Tony Blair and his Culture Secretary Tessa Jowell say that staggering closing times will diffuse

city centre mayhem and bring new maturity to our drinking culture, police warn of extra resources needed and doctors produce frightening statistics on liver disease.

Pupils at a Kent school start the new term as subjects of a random drug testing trial. Head teacher Paul Walker finds himself at the centre of heated media debate, but insists the mouth swab tests, which detect cannabis, speed, ecstasy, heroin and cocaine, will only be used to guide any miscreants towards counselling and support.



February

New commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Ian Blair, declares his intention to get tough on dinner-party cocaine users, instead of just targeting street dealers. The middle-classes need to realise they are not above the law, and are morally accountable for

the 'trail of blood back to Columbia' – 'People who wouldn't dream of having a non-organic vegetable don't seem to notice the blood on their fingers,' he says.

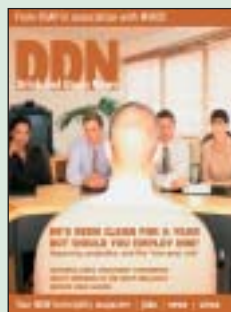
Researchers at Glasgow Caledonian University find themselves in the spotlight for a study that suggests that well-educated, employed people can take heroin over a long period of time without it destroying their lives – a conclusion that some campaigners complain is irresponsible.

Meanwhile, the United Nations announces Britain as the 'heroin capital of Europe'.

March

Scotland publishes its Licensing Bill, tackling underage and binge drinking and making it easier for local communities to have a say in whether licences are granted. Minister Tavish Scott says it will tackle Scotland's 'shocking record' on alcohol.

The International Narcotics Control Board

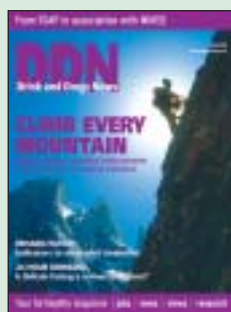


announces that a British-led attempt to persuade Afghan opium farmers to grow other crops has failed. A bumper 4,200 tonne crop – 800 tonnes more than the previous year – will contribute to 90 per cent of the heroin sold on Britain's streets.

There is panic the following week at the UN's

annual commission on narcotic drugs meeting in Vienna, when the US announces it will not endorse needle exchanges or heroin substitution programmes, in reaction to the growing heroin epidemic. Britain is among EU countries that are deeply concerned at the effect this will have on the spread of infection, particularly HIV and Aids.

Back home, Alcohol Concern warns of a 'chronic lack of progress' on the first anniversary of the National Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England, and the government publishes 'Every Child Matters'.



April

Models of Care for Alcohol Misusers (MoCAM) goes out to consultation for three months.

Reactions to the Drugs Bill grow fiercer and the row over mushrooms keeps mushrooming: the government is accused of rushing through legislation to reclassify magic

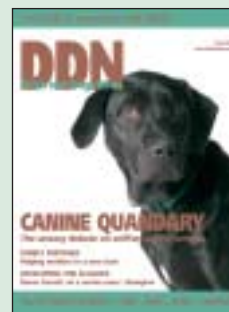
mushrooms as a class A drug without proper debate, and there is talk of it being an election deal between the three main parties.

Release and Transform publicise their concerns about the Drugs Bill, accusing it of being overly focused on criminal justice interventions, and containing populist 'tough on drugs' measures that could be counter productive.

May

UK Sport, the national anti-doping organisation, announces a policy and set of model rules to promote doping-free sport in the UK and clamp down on those who fail drugs tests. Many of sport's big names, including Paula Radcliffe and Jonny Wilkinson, join the '100% ME' drug-free sport education campaign.

Alongside a growing debate about cannabis and mental health, Home Secretary Charles Clarke asks



the Advisory Council for the Misuse of Drugs to debate whether 'skunk' varieties should have a higher classification.

GPs announce their wish to work more closely with drug treatment services in managing drug users in primary care, and The Royal College of General

Practitioners reports keen uptake of their training for GPs on treating drug users.



June

The US pushes the UN further to block the use of needle exchange programmes in countries where drug use drives the spread of Aids, arguing that such schemes encourage drug use. Britain is among countries continuing to oppose the US position, arguing that

harm reduction measures are essential.

Scotland's Health Minister launches an action plan to tackle Hepatitis C, calling on health professionals from all backgrounds to get involved in tackling the 'hidden killer'.

First Minister Jack McConnell announces a 'historic day for Scotland' with approval of a Smoking Bill that will become law next March and make Scotland the first part of the UK to become smoke free in all enclosed public places.

July

A leaked Downing Street report shows a failing war on drugs, as researchers find that police and courts' action relating to hard drugs are having little effect on production and supplies – powering the case for legalising drugs so they are not controlled by criminal operations. Only half of the report is released to the public, provoking an outcry that evidence is being suppressed to avoid government embarrassment.

The law change on magic mushrooms comes into effect, giving them the same classification as heroin and cocaine. Transform is among those to comment that 'the outcomes of this change will be all bad'.

The Liberal Democrats request government figures on alcoholic liver disease, to demonstrate the folly of new licensing laws. Alcoholic liver disease is shown to have nearly doubled in less than 10 years, at a cost to England's health service of more than £71 million a

The highs have been inspiring – more funding, more joint-working. The lows have been disastrous – creeping levels of alcoholism and Hepatitis C; shortages of life-saving drugs. DDN takes you on a whistle-stop tour of 2005.



year. Patients are getting younger and doctors are treating the type of liver disease in 20 and 30-year-olds that they have previously seen only in patients in their 50s and 60s.

Ofsted, the education standards watchdog, reports that a growing number of primary

schools are giving drugs lessons to children as young as seven. The chief schools inspector says children need guidance to prevent them following celebrity examples like Pete Docherty and Prince Harry.

In the middle of the UK's three-year term leading US, European and local forces in the fight against Afghanistan's drug trade, the British government suffers the embarrassment of levels of opium cultivation reaching an all time high of nearly half a million acres. America criticises Britain's 'softly-softly' approach.

The NTA is displaying more optimism: chief executive Paul Hayes announces a 27 per cent increase in the number of people in contact with drug services during the past year.

August

Former labour MP Mo Mowlem loses her battle against cancer. Speaking out against the farce of recent cannabis debates, she had called for an end to the current 'hypocritical and confusing situation' through legalising cannabis and taxing it to help pay for addiction treatment.

Scottish Drugs Forum's drugs death conference attracts interest and controversy from those at opposite ends of the abstinence versus harm reduction scale.

September

Supermodel Kate Moss finds herself headline fodder when the Daily Mirror publishes grainy pictures of her allegedly snorting cocaine in a recording studio, with Pete Doherty and entourage. Her modelling contracts teeter as fashion giant H&M, with whom she had a £1.2 million deal, initially say they will stand by her – then topples, as H&M, Chanel and Burberry fire her to make a clear statement to a very interested public about their 'no tolerance' policies on drugs.

Doctors warn the government of underestimating a looming public health disaster, as a study reveals that 500,000 people are likely to be carrying the Hepatitis C virus in Britain – double government figures, which could cost the NHS £8 billion over the



next 20 to 30 years. Diagnosis and treatment must improve dramatically as we head towards a crisis, says Prof William Rosenberg, a consultant at Southampton General Hospital.

Britain announces extra funding to curb opium production in Afghanistan, taking this

country's contribution to £270 million. Half the money will be spent on law enforcement to counter smuggling; half will go towards developing alternative livelihoods for opium farmers.

Meanwhile, a shortage of diamorphine (prescribed heroin) escalates to desperate levels. Problems with the factory that supplies 70 per cent of the UK's diamorphine was announced at the beginning of the year – but no alternative supply has been found. In the meantime long-term patients, including those prescribed diamorphine maintenance treatment for drug dependence, are left waiting for a solution that is nowhere in sight.

UKHRA is among harm reduction groups calling for swift resolution by importing alternative supplies – but politics prevail and the government refuses to change to a supplier from another European member state. 'The current situation will continue until at least February 2006,' says the NTA.



October

David Cameron overtakes David Davis in the Conservative leadership contest, but can't shake off questions about drug use in his past. At a Blackpool fringe meeting he refuses to answer a question on whether he has ever taken drugs. Media questions come

thick and fast, to be fielded with his statement that 'what's private in the past should remain private' and an admission that he had 'erred and strayed' at university. Eventually he was riled enough to answer 'no' to the question 'have you ever snorted cocaine as an MP?', but still becomes 'Cannabis Cameron' to the tabloids.

November

The risks of methamphetamine, known as crystal meth, are reviewed by the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, in response to Home Office



concerns about its rising popularity in the UK, particularly on the gay club scene. The ACMD advises that the drug should remain a class B drug, despite horror stories from the US where its use has become increasingly widespread.

As concerns about new licensing laws reach a

crescendo, round-the-clock opening times arrive on 24 November. Tough new measures to deal with any alcohol fuelled disorder have been waiting for Britain's boozers to lurch into action and fears for the nation's livers propel safer drinking campaigns to teach the unfamiliar habit of moderation. Alcohol Concern launches a 'Spend £1, Get £5 Free!' campaign, calling for investment in alcohol treatment to save health, social and criminal justice costs.

Cocaine is identified by the EU drugs agency as the 'stimulant drug of choice' for many young Europeans, with Britain at the top of the European league table for cocaine use.

DDN celebrates its first birthday, as circulation rises to over 10,000.



December

All suspects arrested for 'trigger offences' such as burglary, theft and handling stolen goods will be drug tested by police for heroin, cocaine and crack. New powers are part of the Drugs Act 2005, which requires those who test positive to attend a drug

assessment, even if they are not charged with the offence. New thresholds are also proposed for personal possession – the amount that a person can carry without being charged for dealing in the drug. Cannabis controversy rears its head again with police announcing a reversal of the 'softly softly' approach to those caught with the drug. Worried by the increase in cases of possession and trafficking in Brixton, where a more liberal policy was trialled, the Metropolitan Police are discussing plans with the community to get tougher again.

Psychosis continues to make headlines, with a Danish study concluding that cannabis smokers have a high risk of developing severe and lasting psychiatric disorders. **DDN**