

# 2004: A year in headlines

**Professor David Clark looks at how the popular press covered a range of issues related to substance use and misuse.**

**January:** Cannabis reclassified from a Class B to a Class C drug. Guardian survey reveals widespread confusion and inconsistencies about how the police will enforce the new law. Tennis player Greg Rusedski tests positive for the steroid nandrolone – claims 47 other players had elevated levels. Report claims that only one prison out of 138 in England and Wales has a recognised alcohol abuse programme in place.

**February:** *The Scotsman* runs a week's worth of articles on 'Alcohol: A National Excuse'. The country's leading alcohol experts not only dismiss Scottish Executive claims that alcohol consumption has remained stable for two decades, but emphasise the considerable problems arising from excessive consumption in Scotland. *The Observer* editorial calls for reform of women's prisons, emphasising the problems of suicide, self-harm, drug abuse and mental health problems. Research in Glasgow casts doubt on the mental and physical tasks that police have been using for three years to try to crack down on what is feared to be an epidemic of drug driving. The average UK household spends more each week on alcohol to drink at home than on fresh fruit and vegetables, according to the Office for National Statistics. Tony Blair announces that schoolchildren will be subjected to random drug testing. *The Guardian* claims that recreational drug users are turning to a new generation of psychedelics, obtained from the US via the internet.

**March:** A report by the Academy of Medical Sciences calls on the government to take immediate measures to cut drinking to 1970 levels. The report points out that per capita consumption of alcohol has risen by 50 per cent in the UK since 1970, whereas in France and Italy it has more than halved. The Prime Minister's Strategy Unit launches the long-awaited *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy*. A *British Medical Journal* editorial calls it "the dampest of squibs". Greg Rusedski cleared of taking the steroid nandrolone.



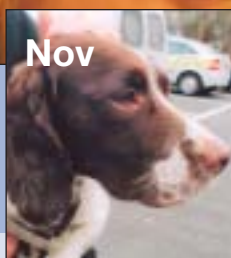
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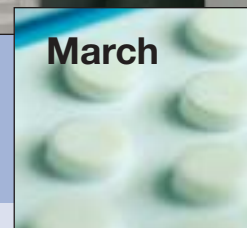
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March

**April:** Nick Davies continues his series of thought provoking articles on the criminal justice system in *The Guardian*. The Home Office confirm that underage youths will be used by police in sting operations to catch shops and pubs which sell alcohol to minors.

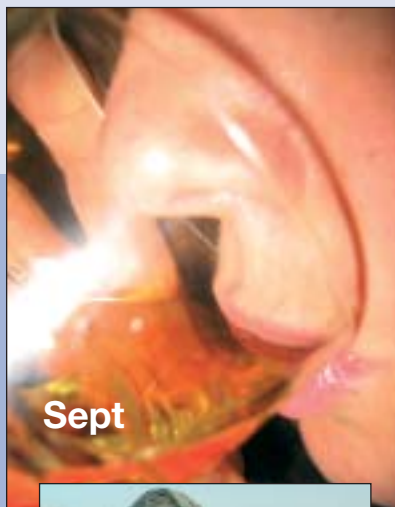
**May:** The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh calls for considerable extra resources to improve detection and treatment rates for hepatitis C. *The Observer* claims that 'soaring levels of cocaine use among young British professionals have led to a record number of deaths'. Drugscope reveals that police sniffer dogs are being used regularly in more than 100 secondary schools in England and Wales to search children for drugs. But 'super-mice' may replace sniffer dogs: 'He wears no mask or cape, but America's next super-hero could turn out to be a genetically modified Mighty Mouse with a sense of smell 10,000 times stronger than normal.' *The Guardian* editorial claims that obesity will soon supersede tobacco as the greatest cause of premature death in this country.

**June:** A majority of people across all social classes back a workplace smoking ban according to an ASH survey. The health secretary, John Reid, says that smoking is one of the few pleasures left for the poor on sink estates and in working men's clubs. British Airways is to test its 47,000 staff for drugs and

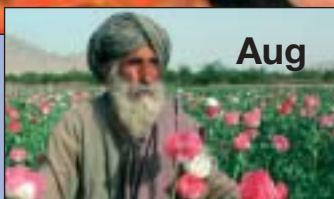
alcohol, following embarrassing incidents in which pilots have been arrested for drunkenness. The effective strength of cannabis consumed in Britain has remained stable for the past 30 years, according to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. The Chair of the Police Federation claims that there is still widespread confusion about how to treat blatant cannabis smokers who went beyond 'acceptable behaviour' in public.

**July:** UK universities and the charity Cancer Research UK sign a joint protocol on good practice for universities on the issue of funding of research by the tobacco industry. A lottery winner who scooped a £9.7m jackpot is jailed for five months after breaching a drugs testing and treatment order. David Blunkett warns that heavy drinking has fuelled a culture of 'thuggery and intimidation'. Research shows that 41 per cent of Britons support cannabis legalisation, but only 8 per cent endorse the view that adults should be free to take any drugs they wish. *The Independent* claims that ministers are considering a radical scheme to vaccinate children against future drug addiction. Guardian investigation discovers that the Ministry of Defence has been buying a new stimulant in bulk.

**August:** The US blames Britain's 'lack of urgency' for its failure to arrest the booming



Sept



Aug



Dec



July

opium trade in Afghanistan. Kostas Kederis, the Greek athlete expected to light the Olympic flame, and Katerina Thanou miss drug tests, fake a motorcycle accident, spend several days in hospital recovering, and then withdraw from the Olympics. Study reveals that one in 50 people in three major English cities are injecting drugs. Same study suggests that only one in four drug misusers are in treatment programmes. The Office for National Statistics reports 4,767 deaths in England and Wales between 1993 and 2002 involving antidepressant overdoses. Around 80 per cent of these deaths were recorded as suicides.

**September:** Foreign Office launches a campaign warning of the dangers of becoming involved in drugs abroad. Survey suggests that one in four young women who regularly go to clubs and pubs had their drinks spiked last year. Six out of 10 women sent to jail while they await trial are acquitted or given a non-custodial sentence, a report reveals. Drugs charities accuse the government of abandoning plans to set up a network of doctors prescribing pure heroin to addicts. Study shows that Glasgow has at least 60 pre-teen heroin addicts, and there could be many more. Market research suggests that British women aged between 18 and 24 drink more than women of that age in any other European country.

**October:** Turning Point claims that a lack of joined-up services in health and social care is costing Britain more than £7bn a year. The General Medical Council resumes its hearing into charges of serious professional misconduct against doctors writing prescriptions for people with a drug problem at a leading private drug clinic. Conservatives claim that they will undertake a 10-fold expansion of drug treatment programmes. *The Scotsman* claims that Scottish jails will give heroin injection kits to prisoners to combat the spread of deadly diseases. In Scottish study, almost 60 per cent of clients said the only thing they were aiming for was abstinence from drugs, when they were asked what change in their drug use they were seeking to bring about on the basis of coming forward for treatment. The scale of gun crime becomes a major concern in the press.

**November:** The communications regulator Ofcom brings in new rules to regulate alcohol advertising. The Institute of Alcohol Studies claims that the rules are cosmetic and likely to have little tangible effect. Thieves escape with a phial of allegedly drug-tainted urine from an Olympic gold-medal-winning horse. NTA officials are accused of misleading ministers and inflating the number of problem drug users in treatment programmes. The Duchess of Northumberland has been given permission to grow drugs – cannabis, opium poppies, tobacco, coca plant – in her world famous public garden. The American ‘super-cop’ brought in by the Home Office to cut Britain’s crime rate warns that the nation’s binge drinking culture is spiralling out of control and fuelling an epidemic of violence outside pubs and clubs that threatens to overwhelm the police. An underworld contract has been taken out on one of the drug dogs operating at Manchester prison because it has become too successful.

**December:** BALCO boss Victor Conte claims he provided superstar athlete Marion Jones with a steroid and a variety of banned drugs leading up to the 2000 Olympic Games in Sydney. Medicines regulator decides there is no evidence that the class of antidepressants known as SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) causes increased self harm, but says such drugs are too readily prescribed. Inquiry is criticised for looking at summaries provided by drug companies, rather than the full clinical trial data. *The Guardian* reports that giant coca plants found in Colombia are probably due to aggressive fertilisation or natural mutations, rather than being due to drug traffickers trying to develop genetically modified cocaine bushes. Next day, *The Independent* reports that Colombian government officials claim that drug cartels have developed a genetically modified giant coca “tree” that produces eight times the usual cocaine crop and is capable of withstanding herbicides used by the anti-drug agencies.

Some quotes on the topic of the year:

## Alcohol

‘Household surveys, which a lot of these statistics are based on, grossly under-report total alcohol consumption. For one thing, the really heavy drinkers are never in when researchers call – they are always at the pub.’

**Johnathon Chick in *The Scotsman***

‘Scotland has had a problem for years but we’ve never really faced up to it. As a nation, we make excuses – it’s not our fault. All the characteristics of the individual alcoholic can be applied to the culture as a whole.’

**Dr Stuart Hislop in *The Scotsman***

‘A strategic programme is needed now to curb the nation’s escalating level of drinking in the interests of both individual and public health. The country has reached a point where it is necessary and urgent to call time on runaway alcohol consumption.’

**Academy of Medical Sciences**

‘Which is more dangerous: the new drugs on the block or the oldest drug on the market? The British Crime Survey shows a mere 16 per cent of violent acts by strangers are prompted by drugs; but 53 per cent by alcohol. Similarly with domestic violence: 12 per cent are drug-related, alcohol 44 per cent.’

**Guardian editorial**

‘Why then are we all so complacent? One reason is that it’s our favourite drug. Most people in England drink, and many of us—including prime ministers, journalists, judges, doctors, policy pundits, and medical journal editors—like to stack it away. Righteous indignation about ecstasy is easy because we don’t use it and don’t want to.’

**British Medical Journal editorial**

‘The giants of the drinks industry must start sharing the risk that alcohol poses with a share of their huge profits, to support those who become dependent on alcohol.’

**Peter Martin, CEO of Addaction**

‘The problem with politicians, is that they want quick results. But this is not something that can be solved quickly. It requires cultural change. Too often this government has looked like it’s thrashing around looking for a solution.’

**Ian Hutchison of Saving faces about alcohol**

*From The Guardian:*

‘I had watched British drinking levels rise throughout the 1990s with increasing alarm,’ recalls Griffith Edwards, professor of addiction behaviour at King’s College, London. ‘I was very keen to have a more scientific discussion about alcohol. But the most extraordinary process evolved.’ Edwards, together with fellow board members, argued that to counter the harm caused by alcohol, Britain would have to reduce its overall consumption. ‘The civil servants looked aghast. They said “no” and consulted other experts,’ Edwards says. Sir Richard Doll was solicited for an alternative view. ‘The alcohol-related cirrhosis figures are shocking,’ he says. ‘Drinking in moderation is fine, even good for you, but we are drinking ourselves to death. Every scientific committee I have ever sat on has concluded that reduction in harm caused by drinking can only be achieved by reducing our overall consumption. It just doesn’t work to target a minority. The only people I have seen recommend this is the strategy unit.’

## And the quote of the year...

‘It’s a big injustice, I have never used banned substances – honestly. All these people who crucify me on TV are the same people who wanted to be photographed with me after every success. But after crucifixion comes resurrection.’

**Greek athlete Kostas Kederis**