



## Could alcohol-related harm be reduced by promoting psychoactive substance use?

At the final AMPHORA meeting in Stockholm, Professor Robin Room led a creative thinking workshop on this controversial topic.

In his introductory talk, Robin Room suggested that because alcohol has significant harm associated with its use, particularly when used to excess, and that youth tend to use alcohol to get drunk, then maybe young people should be encouraged to use safer drugs, such as cannabis and ecstasy, instead of alcohol.

Robin Room discusses the idea of promoting psychoactive substance use as an alcohol-related harm-reduction strategy.

(Click on the image to watch the video interview)



The introduction provoked a lively debate among the workshop attendees, raising several interesting points, related to this idea as a policy option:

### Political barriers:

1. This is a political choice based on politicians' perception of what is legal and what is not and what is dangerous and what is not.
2. In most countries, secretariats responsible for addictive substances operate apart from one another and can be competitive rather than collaborative. For example, tobacco, drug and alcohol policy is not developed in a coordinated manner. Any idea like this, where the relative harms of different drugs are considered, needs drug, alcohol and tobacco policy to be developed as a whole, not separately.

### **Points against the idea:**

1. Countries differ in their approach to cannabis and other drugs, and the relative consumption patterns. For example, in the Netherlands there are a higher percentage of cannabis smokers than in other countries, but the sellers (coffee shops) operate under strict rules and regulations, whereas in Spain there are high levels of youth consumption of illicit drugs as well as high levels of alcohol drinking to drunkenness among youth. If cannabis and ecstasy were legalised or decriminalised, would anything change?
2. If you told the population that cannabis was safer than tobacco, would everybody just switch to using cannabis? It is more important to reduce drug problems than substitute new trends.
3. Cannabis is not risk free; it has its own adverse health impact.
4. Communities need to give young people alcohol-free and drug-free activities to replace drinking alcohol and getting drunk. One example comes from Slovenia under the Yugoslavian regime, when youth could ride horses free of charge.
5. Youth would receive mixed signals from society. Especially from parents, who appear to prefer to see their children drink alcohol rather than use drugs.
6. Increasing the availability of some psychoactive drugs appears counter-intuitive to the AMPHORA message, i.e. that decreasing availability reduces use.
7. The premise here appears to be that there will always be people who are addicted, should we not try to reduce the number of people who suffer from addictions?
8. If cannabis was legalised or decriminalised how would society control it? Would doctors need to write prescriptions?
9. There are a lot of young people who don't use drugs and who don't use alcohol to excess, shouldn't we take a salutogenic approach and promote this kind of behaviour.

### **More positive considerations of the idea:**

1. We need to understand better why young people want to drink and take mind-altering substances. Known factors include thrill seeking, experimentation and wanting risk-taking.
2. Young people tend to carry on drinking alcohol after drinking initiation throughout their lives; however, apart from a small number of chronic users, they tend to stop using cannabis in later life.
3. We should not be afraid of experimental drug use. Chronic users, however, are more likely to use drugs to feel better about themselves, e.g., to escape from concerns about being unemployed. Experimental and chronic drug use are two different things and should be treated differently.
4. Legalisation and decriminalisation of drugs would result in public savings in terms of policing, detention and incarceration costs, freeing up money for the state to spend on other activities.
5. Ecstasy and cannabis have fewer health risks than alcohol. In a large part this is due to lesser social harms caused by these drugs - people using ecstasy and cannabis are less likely to behave violently than those under the influence of alcohol.
6. Alcohol related harm is so enormous - We need to focus on measures that reduce the harm done by alcohol, and this includes thinking outside of the box.

### **Summary:**

In effect, the workshop discussed two visions of a way forward to mitigate the harm caused by alcohol. The first is that there is a minority of youth in society which wants to use mind-altering substances, (including alcohol), to become intoxicated and that there is a need for a harm reduction approach for this group. The second is that young people should be encouraged to live sober lives and this aim would not be achieved by making some illicit drugs more freely available.