

## Commentary on Macleod & Hickman (2010): the implicit rules of evidence-based policy analysis, updated

Macleod & Hickman's story of how the United Kingdom re-classified and then re-reclassified cannabis (in 2002 and 2008, respectively) [1] illustrates neatly at least two of the Implicit Rules of Evidence-Based Drug Policy, at least as Peter Reuter and I articulated them recently [2]:

- 1 Evidence that a drug impairs human capacities is always believable and important.
- 2 Our best estimate of a drug's harm is not the average estimate but the most severe estimate yet obtained.
- 3 Evidence that an illicit drug could have benefits may not be collected.
- 4 Treatment requires evidence of both effectiveness and cost-effectiveness.
- 5 Evidence regarding prevention is always welcome, but it still will not gain much funding.
- 6 Law enforcement and interdiction require no evidence at all; they are assumed to be effective and appropriate.
- 7 Evidence against enforcement creates a presumption that the researcher is a liberal.
- 8 Evidence for harm reduction creates a presumption the researcher approves of drug use.

The story also suggests at least one new rule:

- 9 Scientific research on drugs cannot motivate a change from tough law to lenient law, but it can motivate a change in the opposite direction.

Perhaps one upside of this UK turnabout is that we can finally learn whether re-scheduling cannabis itself is enough to 'send the wrong message', encouraging more use by connoting a lack of firm resolve. The available data cannot support a rigorous econometric analysis, but for what it is worth, past-month prevalence among 16–59-year-olds in England and Wales was 6.4% before in 2000 and 6.5% in 2003–04. (It is too soon to say whether the 2008 re-scheduling mattered.) In comparison, 30-day prevalence stayed flat in Germany, Spain and Italy and rose slightly in Finland and Sweden during this period [3].

After Macleod & Hickman carefully document the uncertainties surrounding the cannabis–schizophrenia association, they then offer a sweepingly casual assessment of drug policy:

The most rational policy on cannabis from a public health perspective would seem to be one able to

achieve the benefit of reduced use in the population while minimizing social and other costs of the policy itself. Prohibition, whatever the sentence tariff associated with it, seems unlikely to fulfil these criteria.

I very much agree with the first sentence, but the second one seems awfully brash. If rigorous causal identification is difficult for the cannabis–schizophrenia link, it is surely nearly impossible for the prohibition–costs link (or links)—we lack even a rough case–control study of the effects of prohibition, much less the controlled trial one would really like to establish the efficacy of the intervention. There are good reasons to argue that drug prohibition is a mess; we just do not yet know for sure whether the alternatives would work better.

It is tempting to counter by arguing that realistic policy analysis requires a more lax view of evidence; decisions have to be made and the failure to act is itself costly. However, if we take this stance, we risk losing any basis for contending that the 2008 UK re-scheduling involved 'jumping to premature conclusions'—a sentiment of Macleod & Hickman that I find myself sharing.

Perhaps this suggests one more rule [4]:

- 10 Experts like to have it both ways; we hold the government to higher standards of proof than we apply to our own policy opinions.

### Declaration of interests

None.

**Keywords** Cannabis policy, cannabis prevalence, drug policy, drug prohibition, evidence-based policy making, standards of proof.

ROBERT J. MACCOUN

*Goldman School of Public Policy and Berkeley Law School,  
University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA, USA.*

*E-mail: maccoun@berkeley.edu*

### References

1. Macleod J., Hickman M. How ideology shapes the evidence and the policy: what do we know about cannabis use and what should we do? *Addiction* in press.

2. MacCoun R. J., Reuter P. The implicit rules of evidence-based drug policy: a US perspective. *Int J Drug Policy* 2008; **19**: 231–2.
3. The European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA). *2009 Annual Report on the State of the Drugs Problem in Europe (Table GPS-5)*. Lisbon: EMCDDA, 2009.
4. MacCoun R. J., Paletz S. Citizens' perceptions of ideological bias in research on public policy controversies. *Polit Psychol* 2009; **30**: 43–65.

6  
7  
8  
9  
10

<b>Toppan Best-set Premedia Limited</b>	
Journal Code: ADD	Proofreader: Jason
Article No: 2936	Delivery date: 25 February 2010
Page Extent: 2	

## AUTHOR QUERY FORM

Dear Author,

During the preparation of your manuscript for publication, the questions listed below have arisen. Please attend to these matters and return this form with your proof.

Many thanks for your assistance.

Query References	Query	Remark
q1	AUTHOR: If this reference has now been published online, please add relevant year/DOI information. If this reference has now been published in print, please add relevant volume/page/year information.	

# MARKED PROOF

## Please correct and return this set

Please use the proof correction marks shown below for all alterations and corrections. If you wish to return your proof by fax you should ensure that all amendments are written clearly in dark ink and are made well within the page margins.

<i>Instruction to printer</i>	<i>Textual mark</i>	<i>Marginal mark</i>
Leave unchanged	... under matter to remain	Ⓟ
Insert in text the matter indicated in the margin	∧	New matter followed by ∧ or ∧ <sup>Ⓢ</sup>
Delete	/ through single character, rule or underline or ┌───┐ through all characters to be deleted	Ⓞ or Ⓞ <sup>Ⓢ</sup>
Substitute character or substitute part of one or more word(s)	/ through letter or ┌───┐ through characters	new character / or new characters /
Change to italics	— under matter to be changed	↙
Change to capitals	≡ under matter to be changed	≡
Change to small capitals	≡ under matter to be changed	≡
Change to bold type	~ under matter to be changed	~
Change to bold italic	≈ under matter to be changed	≈
Change to lower case	Encircle matter to be changed	≡
Change italic to upright type	(As above)	⊕
Change bold to non-bold type	(As above)	⊖
Insert 'superior' character	/ through character or ∧ where required	Υ or Υ under character e.g. Υ or Υ
Insert 'inferior' character	(As above)	∧ over character e.g. ∧
Insert full stop	(As above)	⊙
Insert comma	(As above)	,
Insert single quotation marks	(As above)	ʹ or ʸ and/or ʹ or ʸ
Insert double quotation marks	(As above)	“ or ” and/or ” or ”
Insert hyphen	(As above)	⊥
Start new paragraph	┌	┌
No new paragraph	┐	┐
Transpose	└┘	└┘
Close up	linking ○ characters	○
Insert or substitute space between characters or words	/ through character or ∧ where required	Υ
Reduce space between characters or words		↑