

By email: [le.committee@aph.gov.au](mailto:le.committee@aph.gov.au)

17 January 2023

### **Australian Academy of Science submission on the Inquiry into Australia's illicit drug problem**

The Australian Academy of Science welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Joint Committee on Law Enforcement's inquiry into Australia's illicit drug problem.

The Academy:

- Encourages the Committee to engage with a recent joint symposium on illegal drug regulation in Australia
- Urges an evidence-based approach to drug policy in Australia
- Notes emerging evidence of possible therapeutic benefits from the use of some illegal drugs in combination with other treatments, and recommends the Committee explore ways to support further research

#### [We need an evidence-based approach to drug policy in Australia](#)

The Australian Academy of Science (AAS) and the Australian Academy of Law held a joint symposium in late 2022 on illegal drug regulation in Australia.<sup>1</sup> Speakers included a former judge and prosecutor for drug-related crimes, a social scientist researching the impact of stigma in the health system, a scientist researching pharmacology, and the former NSW Director of Public Prosecutions. A recording of the Symposium is available on the Academy's website;<sup>2</sup> the AAS urges the Committee to consider the symposium in full.

As detailed in the symposium by the Hon (Acting) Justice Richard Refshauge SC, the history of illicit drug policy shows that legislation has largely been shaped by cultural factors and political expediency, rather than scientific evidence for harm reduction. The AAS urges the Committee recommend the Commonwealth and state and territory governments develop and implement an evidence-based framework for drug regulation.

#### [Promising new evidence of therapeutic benefit shows need for support for further research](#)

New evidence is emerging to show that some drugs—currently illegal in Australia—may hold substantial therapeutic benefit when combined with other treatments. For instance, small-scale trials of psilocybin (a chemical compound found in magic mushrooms) and methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA) have shown beneficial results in treating a range of conditions, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and alcoholism.<sup>3</sup> Importantly, the benefits have occurred when these drugs have been a part of a combined treatment regime, implying that any future regulatory change on grounds of therapeutic benefit may require consumption in a healthcare setting.

These studies have been expensive and involved navigating significant legal and government complexities. This reflects the disjointed history of research into these substances which largely ceased worldwide during the late 1960s and 1970s; contemporary research has shown promising evidence but has largely been restricted to small-scale trials. Consequently, the Committee should make recommendations targeted towards supporting additional, large-scale studies to further explore the implications of these results for medical treatments.

Substantial recent reform to the regulations surrounding cannabis in Australia demonstrate there is potential for evidence-based reform for illicit drugs that have therapeutic benefit. In 2016, cultivation of cannabis was legalised for medical and scientific purposes, and the production and dispensing of the drug now occurs under strict Commonwealth regulation. This reform occurred following evidence of benefit to patients with conditions including terminal cancer, childhood epilepsy, and chronic pain management.<sup>4</sup>

To discuss or clarify any aspect of this submission, please contact Mr Chris Anderson, Director Science Policy at [Chris.Anderson@science.org.au](mailto:Chris.Anderson@science.org.au).

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Academy of Science, 'Illegal drug regulation in Australia: 'It's almost unethical not to revisit this'', 14 December 2022, <https://www.science.org.au/news-and-events/news-and-media-releases/illegal-drug-regulation-in-australia-its-almost-unethical-not-to-revisit-this#joint-symposium-recording>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Academy of Law and Australian Academy of Science, 'Joint Symposium', streamed live on 18 October 2022, recording available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qbcoMDSHou0>

<sup>3</sup> David Nutt, 'Psychedelic drugs—a new era in psychiatry?', *Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience* 21, no. 2 (2019): 139-147; Richard E. Daws *et al*, 'Increased global integration in the brain after psilocybin therapy for depression', *Nature Medicine* 28 (2022): 844–851.

<sup>4</sup> John McMillan, *Review of the Narcotic Drugs Act 1967: Final Report*, Department of Health (2019), <https://www.tga.gov.au/sites/default/files/review-narcotic-drugs-act-1967-final-report.pdf>: 18 ; D.J. Castle, N. Strauss, A. Norman, and Y. Bonomo, 'Medical Marijuana: The Australian Experience', *Missouri Medicine* 116, no. 4 (2019): 270-273.