I am a consultant psychiatrist in Widnes, northern England and prescribe hard drugs such as heroin and cocaine. Ironically I may not prescribe hasheesh, nor opium nor coca. This is like being able to prescribe cognac but not wine. Nevertheless this policy has eliminated drug deaths, there is no H.I.V. infection, and a police study of our program shows a 15-fold fall in drug-related acquisitive crime. Most interestingly, the incidence of addiction has fallen 12-fold.

HARM MAXIMISATION AND INHUMANITY

Daniel Roche is a citizen of Widnes. In adolescence he experimented with drugs. He gained a liking for cannabis. Avoiding the black market, he grew his own cannabis on local unused wastelands. He supplied himself, in this way, peacefully, for eighteen years. He was a cable layer, working for a large electrical company. He paid taxes. He had his own house. He was married, with children successful at school.

In 1988 the police seized his cannabis, and he was fired from his job. He couldn’t pay his mortgage, so he lost his house. More cannabis was found growing in his garden. He was sent to prison and his family split up. He is now still in prison in Liverpool. I call this policy “harm maximisation”.

John Montgomery of Oklahoma is a paraplegic. He lives with his mother, who buys his hasheesh, the only thing that relieves his muscle spasms. Earlier this year Jim Montgomery was sentenced to life imprisonment when two ounces of hasheesh were found under his pillow. I call this policy “inhumanity”.

If all government expenditure on warnings against tobacco are divided by the total number of deaths from tobacco and similarly for...
alcohol, heroin and cannabis, we get £30 per tobacco death, £300 per alcohol death and £1.5m per heroin death, which illustrates the ‘overkill’ against heroin. But the ratio for cannabis is infinity, because the denominator is zero.

DANGEROUS BECAUSE THEY ARE FORBIDDEN

Prohibition has its origins in a fundamentalist religious belief that drugs offer independent and therefore dangerous solace. The bizarre belief of prohibition, that forbidden drug use avoids the harm from using drugs, not only prevents citizens learning how to use drugs while avoiding their harms but also gives the erroneous impression that things not prohibited are harmless. A knife is arguably more dangerous than a drug and it is clear from this example that it is the uses to which knives or drugs are put that determine whether they are dangerous. In fact the opposition to drugs is ideological, usually religious. Drugs are not forbidden because they are dangerous but dangerous because they are forbidden.

Undoubtedly the way drugs are taken may be dangerous, but to claim that an inert chemical, rather than what one does with it, is dangerous is not merely nonsense; it is the thirteenth chime of the clock, which casts doubt on all that has gone before, and diminishes the effects of the health propagandists’ more sensible work. It is well that there are organisations such as the World Health Organisation which seek to draw our attention to the dangers of drug taking, but it is not at all well that the members of such organisations should behave as though drug takers are hostes humani generis, or as though the rules of evidence do not apply to those who campaign against drug taking.

Some ways of taking drugs may be dangerous to life, the individual or society, but the drug taker who thus misuses her drugs no more represents the totality of drug takers than the alcoholic derelicts in the gutter represent the totality of alcohol consumers. It is generally agreed that there is a link between some forms of drug taking and certain unpleasant medical conditions. Obviously I do not deny that claim and I do not recommend the practice, and if someone — one of my children, say — were to ask my advice on the matter, I would make a considered and, I flatter myself, eloquent case for not taking drugs such as to become dependent upon them. But three things, when I contemplate the anti-drug propaganda, stick in my throat.

INTOLERANT FANATICISM

The least important is the twisted argument it leads prohibitionists into. For example it is often said of such cases “If she hadn’t taken drugs she’d not have died so young”, to which I’m inclined to reply that if she hadn’t been born she wouldn’t have died of anything and that if we’d some eggs we could have some bacon and eggs if we also had some bacon, or even that if my grandmother had wheels she might well be a bicycle.

The second, worse, trait of the anti-drug prohibitionists is their intolerant fanaticism. The language they use about drug takers is the language of hate; to call it totalitarian would be very little of an exaggeration and will soon be none at all. Nor are they content to ensure — and a very reasonable claim it would be — that as far as is reasonable, drug taking should be restricted to private homes or specially licensed premises. No: they insist that all drug taking shall be stamped out by law, that the world and every citizen’s private home shall be exclusively for the use of non-drug takers and that more and heavier penalties shall be inflicted on those who take drugs, including life-imprisonment for the paralytic who smoked cannabis to relieve his spasms, and penalties are even provided for those who fail to report a fellow citizen, or in America a family member, who is taking a drug. Have we forgotten Soviet Russia so soon?

GOOD BY COMPULSION

But the third and worst failing of the anti-drug propagandists is their inability to see, or if they see to admit, that what they are advocating is an assault — a serious assault — on the individual’s freedom to lead his or her life in whatever directions, including dangerous ones, he or she chooses. To choose whether we take drugs is part of a great right — the greatest, really — the right to govern our own lives, and not to have others govern them for us. Of all the tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. To be “cured” against one’s will of conditions we may not regard as diseases is to be put on a level with those who have not yet reached the age of reason or never will; to be classed with infants, imbeciles, and domestic animals. All societies which have tried to make the citizen good by compulsion have come to grief, and the grief has almost invariably been that of the citizens, not the leaders.