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Sacking of chief adviser 'will leave drugs service in disarray'

Growing fury at 'disgraceful' decision that undermines relations between politicians and scientists

By Danny Brierley

Leading members of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) are expected to resign over the sacking of its chairman, leaving the service in disarray, one of its leading scientists has warned.

Dr Les King, a respected chemist and former head of the Drugs Intelligence Unit in the Forensic Science Service, said that anger over the Home Secretary Alan Johnson's "disgraceful" decision to remove Professor David Nutt could lead to a meltdown in the 40-year-old organisation.

As many as six of its scientists will resign from the independent organisation, he claimed, putting further pressure on the Government over its handling of the affair. Dr King cautioned that the Government's whole drugs programme could be at risk.

The row also has wider ramifications for the relationship between politicians and scientists, many of whom are concerned at Mr Johnson's reaction to Professor Nutt's comments. Dr King said: "Academics, medics and others are going to ask themselves if they want to serve on these agencies without payment, on their own time and expense, when the advice that they produce is routinely ignored."

The row has intensified after Mr Johnson accused Professor Nutt of "lobbying for a change in policy".

Professor Nutt's dismissal, a first for a chairman of the ACMD, came days after he expressed dismay at the Prime Minister's insistence that cannabis remain a class B drug, and nine months after he said that there was little difference in the dangers of horse riding and taking ecstasy.

Dr King added: "What we say is objective and evidence-based. Some-



Nutt: His sacking could cause 'meltdown' of drugs advisory council

'You cannot question David Nutt's credentials'

CHRIS HUHNE
Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman

times people do not want to hear that. The Government has a statutory obligation to consult the council before it makes any changes to the classification of drugs - the Misuse of Drugs Act is clear about that. If significant figures resign, it cannot function any more, and without a change to the Act of Parliament the Government cannot make any changes."

Members of the council, which meets twice a year, are due to gather again on 10 November, when discussions will be dominated by Professor Nutt's sacking. But the resignations are likely to occur sooner, according to Dr King.

Following the sacking, there are now 30 members of the council, fewer than half of whom are scientists. The Home Office has refused to comment on the possibility of resignations, but the science minister Lord Drayson told followers of his Twitter account that he was "looking into it". The shadow Home Secretary, Chris Grayling, has backed Professor Nutt's sacking, but comments left on the Conservative Party website questioned both the

sacking and the continued prohibition of cannabis.

Chris Huhne, the Liberal Democrats' home affairs spokesman, said: "The sacking was utterly disgraceful and a serious mistake. It has much wider implications, not just for the ACMD but for any independent scientific advisory service trying to give a sensible assessment of evidence to policy-makers. It is absolutely essential that the Government takes impartial, scientific advice. You cannot question David Nutt's credentials - if anyone knows the difference between facts and opinions, it is him."

Others outside the service have also questioned Mr Johnson's handling of the affair. Rudi Fortson, a leading criminal barrister and author who specialises in drug cases, said: "The combined experience of the ACMD is valuable. If the scientists were to sign en masse, who would then determine which drugs ought to be classified and whether they should be classified as A, B or C? A would be left and that would be a matter of some concern."

In an open letter to Mr Johnson, Professor Peter Tyrer, the head of the Centre for Mental Health and editor of the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, said: "I can assure you, as a senior colleague of Professor Nutt, that his scientific credentials are impeccable and his recommendations could not be more authoritative."

Richard Garside, the director of the Centre for Crime and Justice at King's College London, accused Mr Johnson of undermining scientific research. He said: "I'm shocked and dismayed that [he] appears to believe that political calculation trumps honest and informed scientific opinion."

Families call for inquiry into Gosport hospital deaths

By Nina Lakhani

The Government will this week come under further pressure to hold a public inquiry into deaths of elderly patients at Gosport War Memorial Hospital during the 1990s, as relatives and lawyers meet with Norman Lamb MP, the Lib Dem health spokesman.

Failures by the police, CPS, NHS and health regulators can be exposed and lessons learnt only if there is an open and transparent inquiry, according to Mr Lamb.

Relatives have spent years try-



Dr Jane Barton

Transcripts from the doctor's disciplinary hearing are in the hands of the police

ing to access reports about hundreds of deaths at the Hampshire community hospital, which they believe may hold the key into what happened when Dr Jane Barton worked there between 1989 and 2000.

Having received transcripts from Dr Barton's eight-week disciplinary hearing, officers are reinvestigating at least 12 deaths that occurred between 1996 and 1998. Relatives are also urging police to consider the action of nurses who were involved in the care of patients.

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