

Strengthening the integrity of scientific advice in policymaking following the forced resignation of Professor Nutt

Background

The forced resignation of Professor David Nutt as chair of the Advisory Council on Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) has shown deficiencies in the government's scientific advisory system. This briefing covers issues that have arisen from this affair and makes recommendations to strengthen the government's scientific advisory system to ensure its integrity going forward.

Public engagement

The Home Secretary has stated that Professor Nutt should not have challenged government policy in public forums. However, the Guidelines on Scientific Advice in Policymaking, the Code of Practice for Scientific Advisory Committees and the ACMD Code of Practice all support members communicating with the public directly and through the media. The only constraint is that they should be clear when they are speaking on behalf of the advisory council and when they are speaking personally. CaSE recommends that:

- Ministers need to be made aware that government guidelines both encourage and enable independent scientific advisers to communicate to the public.
- Any changes to the guidelines should protect independent scientific advisers' right to publish or communicate to the public about their expertise even if it challenges government policy.

Removal of advisory council members

The Home Secretary established a new precedent when he removed Professor Nutt from the ACMD, because he lost confidence in him. This development is extremely disturbing as it means that scientific advisers can be summarily dismissed by ministers. CaSE recommends that:

- The guidelines on scientific advice in policymaking and code of scientific advisory councils needs to be updated to give greater clarity to ministers and advisers about how and why an adviser can be removed from their position.
- The Government Chief Scientific Adviser should be consulted before an adviser is dismissed during their term.

Rejection of scientific advice in policymaking

Government rejection of ACMD advice on the classification of drugs has probably contributed to this affair. CaSE recommends that:

- There should be published responses from government to scientific advisory committee stating why they have accepted or rejected their recommendations.
- Both the advisory council and its members should not be curtailed from discussing the evidence behind rejected recommendations.

Further information

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