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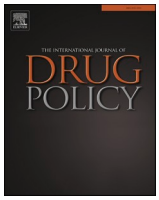
International Journal of Drug Policy 129 (2024) 104481

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo



Viewpoint

The importance of co-produced, multi-method, independent scientific evidence in times of alternative truths and global policy debates

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Introduction

In July 2024 the long established and trusted European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) will cease to exist and will evolve to the new European Drugs Agency (EUDA). In response to the ever diversifying, innovative and complex drug phenomena, the EUDA will open with considerably more powers, new methodological tools, and a proactive remit to support preparedness, monitoring and competence development of policy makers, practitioners and researchers (EMCDDA, 2024). This expanded mandate includes threat assessments and alerts; monitoring and addressing poly-substance use; setting up a network of forensic laboratories; developing and promoting best practice; supporting independent evaluation of drug polices and playing a stronger international role within this remit in the EU. As the old adage coined by notaries from Voltaire to Spiderman have said, "with great power comes great responsibility", and it is in times of global policy pressure from so called 'fake news' to Artificial Intelligence generated data and conspiracy theories that the need for trusted, independent scientific evidence has never been greater.

Background

The EMCDDA was established over 30 years ago, in 1993. It opened its doors in Lisbon in 1995 with 15 member states. As a compromise to opposing prevailing European philosophies it was first formed as an observatory with a public health and public safety rather than a policy focus. Member states agreed to the establishment of five key epidemiological indicators: one, general population prevalence of drug use, two the prevalence of problem drug use, three, the prevalence of HIV and Hepatitis C, four, the level of treatment demand and five, the number of drug related poisonings and mortalities. To help Member States address these five challenges the members also agreed to producing good practice guides. This strategic approach was considered as 'soft power' and was deliberate. At the beginning, the founding scientific committee members were nominated by their country on a political basis rather than selected independently for their scientific background and expertise. In the 30 years that followed, the work and the influence of the agency grew and included not only the establishment of an EU wide early warning system but a legal remit that included the risk assessment of novel psychoactive substances (NPS) and the establishment of a transdisciplinary, independent scientific committee. A committee that was formed by open competition and had legal obligations to critically comment on the agency's annual work plans and the conduct of the risk assessments. Over the course of 30 years, the agency has established a reputation as a trusted, independent source of scientific information for policy and practice.

Challenges

With the expanded tasks of the new EUDA of providing recommendations for policy and practice, new risks emerge including the maintenance of scientific integrity in a politically and emotionally charged field like drug policy.

Firstly, high-quality monitoring rests on a rigorous and a shared methodological framework, however country-based data differs in quality and typically comes with a time lag. The scientific evidence is not stronger than the data it is built on and often recommendations are expected sooner than confirmative evidence exist. There is a risk that recommendations from the new EUDA may be caught between demands for quick wins and demands for increased solid assessment and recommendations, often from an evidence base with shortcomings.

A specific example concerns the Scientific Committee's role in providing recommendations in the context of risk assessments. Risk assessments of new psychoactive substances (NPS) require timely recommendations for decisions, but due to both the novelty and the high risks of the substances, the recommendations sometimes must be made rapidly using only sparse laboratory, forensic and criminal justice data. Banning substances is a powerful tool and restricts availability. It also

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https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104481

Available online 8 June 2024

requires substantial costs downstream to implement and enforce the ban. These decisions are not taken lightly. During its first 25 years, the EMCDDA has monitored 884 NPS and this number is increasing. In the five-year period from 2017 to 2022, the Early Warning System identified serious harms linked to 14 new substances which led to controls at the EU level (EMCDDA, 2022). It is essential that Europe continues to strengthen its early warning on NPS to detect cross-border health threats, communicate risks and enhance its preparedness and response. With the expanded mandate of setting up a network of forensic laboratories, it is anticipated that this network will provide the data in a timelier manner and improve the scientific quality of risk assessments moving forward, with the intention of ameliorating some of the uncertainties inherent in this important task. However if sufficient time and resources are not provided to this network on an ongoing basis then there is a risk of decisions being asked for and made with a lack of evidence.

Secondly, the new agency will be tasked with finding a balance between communicating the inherent limitations to the evidence base, next to providing meaningful recommendations for politicians and policy makers. This challenge will be even more risky in an era faced with the development of 'alternative truths', where the validity of scientific evidence is increasingly questioned. In line with this, one of the risks faced by the EUDA is the declining status of science in political and public debates. Looking ahead, the new scientific committee at the EUDA should actively work to build and maintain the public's trust in science, increase the evidence literacy of the various audience groups—policymakers, civil society including people who use drugs, their families and communities, researchers and, in the process, work to improve their own communication practices.

Opportunities

As the new EUDA emerges it will be in an era of post pandemic and post truth. The aim will be to appropriately infuse scientific evidence within the knowledge cycle. While acknowledging there is often only partial evidence, the agency will be charged with addressing deeply complex and timely social issues in a diversity of ways. The agency's new mandate will open new opportunities to accomplish this. One of the most important of which is working with qualified civil society members in an active and balanced way. This new relationship will provide a reciprocal bridge in which scientific advances can have an impact and the needs of people who use drugs, their families and communities are addressed. Opportunities will now exist for co-production approaches and new innovative methods to cojoin the rigours of scientific enquiry with the values, experiences, knowledge and needs of civil society. Opportunity for advancement in implementation practices, science literacy and meaningful impacts beyond citation metrics will emerge.

While the agency will continue to work with national in-country focal points, the new mandate will develop threat assessment capabilities, will issue alerts via a new EU drug alert system, will monitor and address not individual substances but poly substance use, will set up a network of forensic laboratories, will provide more research and support and will support the evaluation and development of policy. This mandate will provide greater opportunities at country levels to expand monitoring and exploit a diversity of innovative methodologies for the timely identification of new threats and more rapid data collection enhanced by qualitative and participatory-based approaches.

To conclude, in this emerging era of a new European Drugs Agency in a world where change is rapid, truth is questioned and politics are shifting with a rise in populism in the EU, the need for trusted independent multi-method, co-produced scientific sources and advice has never been greater. The introduction of this EUDA has the potential to enhance our understanding of the complex nature of drug-related concerns, from the inception to the conclusion of life, and inform both policy and practice with accurate, unbiased evidence.

Ethics approval

The authors declare that the work reported herein did not require ethics approval because it did not involve animal or human participation.

Funding sources

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Catherine Comiskey: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Henri Bergeron:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Thomas Clausen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Charlotte Colman:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Laura Ferrer-Wreder:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Gabriele Fischer:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Margarida Gaspar de Matos:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Jo-Hanna Ivers:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Marie Jauffret-Roustide:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Marieke Liem:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Tomi Lintonen:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Kim Moeller:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Ilkka Ojanperä:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Fernando Rodríguez de Fonseca:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. **Marta Torrens Mèlich:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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