



## FACTS GO BY THE BOARD

The National Treatment Agency for Substance Misuse board meeting held on Tuesday 16 December 2008 was perhaps most notable for what it failed to reveal. Despite that, we were treated to competent presentations by Rosanna O'Connor on the performance report and employment.

The former purported to show how the NTA is delivering "effective and successful treatment". Sadly, it followed the usual simplistic pattern of numbers in, numbers out. For someone willing to take any government statistics at face value, there appears to be a marked and welcome increase for 2007-8 in the numbers of people completing treatment drug free\*.

The report on employment included an overview of new strategies for getting users back to work. It quickly became apparent that this is in the embryonic stage and appears to lack structured mechanisms for achieving such a desirable treatment outcome. Nor did there appear to be any strategy, other than coercion, to encourage those in treatment to proactively seek paid employment.

Both presentations raised a number of questions this writer would like to have posed, such as:

- Why is the NTA 'part funding' a study commissioned by the UK Drug Policy Commission – one of whose directors is also a NTA director – to examine employers attitudes to recruiting ex-drug users, rather than inviting tenders? Has the Confederation for British Industry or the Small Business Organisations been approached for advice?
- How many of those who have "successfully completed treatment" are now in paid employment?
- Why, if the current treatment protocols are "effective", has violent crime in the Metropolitan Police area for the financial year April-March 2007-8 increased by 22% over 2006-7? Why have drug offences increased by a staggering 73% in the same period?
- Why, if the current strategies are successful, are drug-related deaths for 2007 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland up by 12.7%? (Source: *International Centre for Drug Policy, St George's University*)

I sought to pose the above. Silly, deluded me: the chair stopped me, pointing out that at this stage, questions would only be taken from board members, and that the public would get an opportunity at the end of the proceedings to raise relevant questions. Regrettably, by the time the presentations and questions from board members were dealt with, there was little over 10 minutes for the public. This severely reduced the 'opportunity' to raise the above, so I invite senior NTA members to answer now.

The session on budgets was taken by NTA CEO Paul Hayes who rightly emphasised the need for delivery of "effective evidence based treatment". How strange then that, out of a considerably reduced budget, almost 14% has been allocated to the social engineering experiment of heroin trials, despite the universal evidence from the 'gold standard' Cochrane review that "no definitive conclusions in respect of the overall effectiveness of heroin prescription is possible".

Also, scientific evidence shows that, as severity of addiction worsens with continued administration of the abused drug, the user's interacting brain systems are progressively destroyed; in the latter stages the user seems to lack all power of choice and free will. (Source: *Psychiatric News, July 2007*)

I asked Hayes why, in the light of that evidence, were funds were expended not on evidence-based practice but on experiments which could prove inconclusive and knowingly increase harm? Hayes failed to answer the question directly, indicating that UK clinicians considered it a safe practice, and that there was evidence of success. Since he did not indicate if that "evidence" was scientific, empirical, or anecdotal, this writer suggested that not only was the Cochrane review being ignored, but that the evidence relating to progressive brain damage, was also being disregarded. Hayes reiterated his earlier comments.

In view of the fact that, when I sought to press Hayes further, he was cut off by the chair who invited questions from another member of the public, I wonder if Hayes would accept the invitation give a more relevant response?

*"The National Treatment Agency board meeting was interesting not for what it disclosed but for what it failed to reveal," reports Peter O'Loughlin, who had a frustrating time endeavouring to get questions answered.*

\*For a list of questions posed by *Addiction Today* over two months ago which the NTA declined to answer accurately – including the later question of where are the 66,000-70,000 patients who are neither on substitute medication nor in rehab – go to [www.addictiontoday.org/addictiontoday/2009/01/questions-the-nta-must-answer.html](http://www.addictiontoday.org/addictiontoday/2009/01/questions-the-nta-must-answer.html)