

Statement of Policy on The Use of Illegal Drugs by Junior Members

adopted by the Governing Body on 24 November 2004

Illegal psychoactive drugs are a chemically very diverse class of substances, which vary enormously in their pharmacological properties and effects. They also vary considerably in the type and severity of risk that they pose to the users. Some illegal drugs, like opiates and crack cocaine, are highly addictive, while others only rarely lead to drug dependencies. Some "psychedelic" drugs can induce temporary but sometimes severe states of hallucinatory delusion and over-excitation. During such states, the user's distorted perceptions can provoke serious accidents and injury. In contrast, high doses of "downers", like barbiturates, ketamine or opiates can "calm" the user to the point of respiratory depression and asphyxia. Stimulants, like cocaine and amphetamine, increase the risk of heart attacks, and, when used over prolonged periods, may provoke or accentuate various psychological imbalances like depression, anxiety attacks or paranoia. Different drugs are therefore dangerous in different ways, and some drugs are more dangerous than others. At the same time, many genetic, physiological and psychological factors can influence the way individuals react to a particular drug, so that the same drug may appear to cause few ill effects when taken by some individuals under some circumstances while posing a serious threat to health when taken by other individuals or under different circumstances.

Given this complexity and the potentially serious dangers, the use of many psychoactive drugs is illegal in the UK. Yet despite the prohibition and the health risks, drug use remains relatively widespread in the UK. The reasons why some individuals are tempted by illegal drugs are also very diverse. Peer pressure, bravado, thrill-seeking, a curiosity about drug effects or about the widespread myth that drugs may be a source of creative inspiration, a belief that warnings about the dangers of drugs by the authorities are exaggerated, or a desire to rebel against authority are all possible motivators.

College Response

In order to respond appropriately to cases of illegal drug use, it can be very important to understand the motivation behind the drug use as well as the properties of the particular drugs involved. For example, it is claimed that Cannabis alleviates some of the symptoms of glaucoma or multiple sclerosis. Individuals who suffer from these serious chronic diseases and acquire Cannabis out of a desire to "self medicate" still engage in an illegal activity, but one would clearly not consider their behaviour to be as serious or morally reprehensible as it would be to acquire heroine or crack cocaine with the intention of reselling them at a profit to vulnerable individuals. Illegal drugs can therefore bring a highly complex range of problems, and the College policy with respect to illegal drugs must accordingly be flexible, so that individual circumstances can be taken into account.

In the context of drugs, the College has a number of occasionally conflicting pastoral, legal and disciplinary duties. College members should bear the following in mind:

- 1) The College wishes to offer the highest quality of pastoral care to its junior members. Offering guidance and advice to junior members who have drugs related concerns should be part of this care. College officers will treat confidentially any information volunteered by students who seek such confidential advice, unless strong legal or healthcare concerns make it imperative that outside authorities are informed. Students should note that the College Chaplain, the College Nurse, and the College Doctors are governed by a professional code of conduct which enables, indeed requires, them to observe strict confidentiality. (The College's Statement on Confidentiality is available at www.spc.ox.ac.uk/general/Confidentiality.html).
- 2) While we wish to encourage an atmosphere of openness and understanding at St. Peter's, students must appreciate that the College *cannot* condone illegal activities on its premises. The College is required by law to inform the authorities if it becomes apparent that illegal drugs are stored, sold or consumed on College premises.

Junior members should be aware that the pastoral and disciplinary frameworks for action set out below apply to activities conducted by Junior Members whether they take place on College premises or not and whether they occur in Oxford or not.

