

The Beckley Foundation: Working at the Frontiers of Research



www.beckleyfoundation.org

SINCE NITROUS OXIDE WAS FIRST DISCOVERED by the Englishman Joseph Priestley in 1773 the United Kingdom has had a knack for producing explorers at the frontiers of consciousness. It comes as no surprise then that Aldous Huxley and Humphrey Osmond, who pitted their poetic wits against each other to coin the term ‘psychedelic,’ likewise hailed from England. In keeping with this tradition the U.K. is also home to Amanda Feilding, whose brainchild is the Beckley Foundation, which she directs from its headquarters at Beckley Park in Oxford. The foundation’s two main aims reflect its founder’s interests, namely to investigate consciousness and its altered states and simultaneously to tackle the growing dissatisfaction with the inadequacies of global drug policies.

As a charitable trust the Beckley Foundation promotes the scientific investigation of the physiological and neural correlates underlying consciousness and its altered states. Feilding feels that since we live in a scientific age it is essential to have a scientific explanation of what underpins changing states of awareness; only then can we better integrate the use of altered states responsibly into our social fabric. The study of consciousness is still in its infancy – however the 21st century is being heralded as the century of neuroscience. LSD and other psychedelics provide invaluable tools with which to study the brain and the mind, and it has long been Feilding’s wish to overcome the invisible barriers formed by the current international drug policies, which obstruct the use of such potentially valuable molecules in the advancement of neuroscience.

The study of psychedelics forms only a part of the foundation's wider remit of promoting research into different states of awareness, whether brought about by meditation or breath control; chanting; or the ingestion of psychoactive substances. The research carefully measures changes in subjective experience and also utilizes state-of-the-art monitoring technology, from neuroimaging with EEG and MEG, to measuring changes in cerebral fluid dynamics and neurotransmitter activity with Transcranial Doppler and MRI.

After years of hard work the efforts of the foundation are beginning to reap rewards on both fronts - consciousness research and drug policy. Most significantly, the first study of LSD with human subjects since prohibition blocked all research in the 1970s has recently been granted full ethical approval and now has the green light to proceed. This resumption of LSD research after such a long hiatus is an enormous landmark in both psychedelic neuroscience and the foundation's achievements, opening the doors for much fruitful research in the future.

Other research programs being undertaken by the foundation include a cannabis study to investigate changes in the cerebral blood supply and in neurotransmitter and electrical activity that underlie the "high" experienced when smoking cannabis. In a different vein, the neural correlates of advanced meditative states are also being investigated. A pilot study that has already been conducted was the first to use MEG to study the effects of meditation on brain function. The study found a marked increase in synchronous power within the gamma frequency range, particularly in the right cerebellum, during the same period as the meditator had the experience of "oneness" and light. The gamma increase in the cerebellum was of a magnitude greater than had ever been reported in any other MEG study. Several other research projects are also in development, including work with the renowned Russian scientist, Academician Yuri E. Moskalenko, a pioneer in the investigation of cerebral blood and cerebrospinal fluid dynamics. Among other things, this program is investigating the diminution

of the blood supply to the brain and loss of cerebrospinal fluid mobility, which occurs in the process of ageing, and methods to counteract it.

The Beckley Foundation has a highly distinguished board of scientific advisors. This includes Professor-Doctor Albert Hofmann, Professors Colin Blakemore (chief executive of the Medical Research Council), David Nutt (professor of psychopharmacology at the University of Bristol), and David Nichols (professor of medicinal chemistry and pharmacology at Purdue University), among other notable scientists.

Aside from its consciousness research the foundation has also had recent successes with the other arm of its operations in helping to guide drug policy toward a more rational, evidenced-based approach. One such outcome was the recent publication of the "scale of harm" article in the *Lancet* (beckleyfoundation.org/bib/doc/bf/2007_David_211305_1.pdf). The groundbreaking article ranks 20 commonly used psychoactive drugs, both illegal and legal, along a scale of relative harms, based upon ratings by an array of experts. Out of these, alcohol was ranked the fifth most dangerous, tobacco ninth, cannabis 11th, LSD 14th, and ecstasy 18th. The report also highlights the surprising statistic that alcohol and tobacco together are responsible for 90 percent of all drug-related deaths in the U.K.

One catalyst for this rational, harm-based approach to classification began with discussions at Beckley Park between Feilding and Blakemore, who co-authored the *Lancet* paper with Nutt. Blakemore gave his initial presentation of the new scale of harm at a conference organised by the Beckley Foundation in collaboration with the U.K. Cabinet Office Strategy Unit in July 2003. The paper was updated and re-presented at the Beckley Foundation seminar: *Global Drug Policy – Future Directions*, which was held in 2004 at the House of Lords, Westminster Palace. It has since had a considerable influence in guiding a new approach to the vast ongoing problem of what is the best way to control and regulate society's growing appetite for psychoactive substances. This led the way for a U.K. Parliamentary Select Committee to conclude in 2006 that, "the



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current classification system is not fit for purpose and should be replaced with a more scientifically-based scale of harm” (beckleyfoundation.org/bib/doc/bf/2006_House_211226_1.pdf). Other European Union governments are following this lead.

For the last six years the Beckley Foundation has brought together top international experts from the fields of neuroscience, health, education, law enforcement, and policy-making to analyse and explore the scientific, social, health, and political implications of the latest evidence, in an atmosphere congenial to free communication. These seminars are attended by U.K. government ministers, top representatives of the EU and the United Nations, and individuals such as the chairman of the Russian Federation Drugs Commission and the chairman of the European Union Chiefs of Police. Such forums have considerably opened up the discussion on drug policy and have enabled the Beckley Foundation to catalyze the adoption of a more realistic approach to drug use and classification by the British government.

As an extension of the Beckley Foundation’s aim to help governments rationally evaluate drug policy, it has also founded two independent bodies: the International Society for the Study of Drug Policy (issdp.org), which creates a forum for influential academics from around the world to collaborate and evaluate the effectiveness of different drug policies, and the International Drug Policy Consortium (idpc.info), which provides a platform for nongovernmental organiza-

tions and professional networks to assist policy-makers in making better-informed decisions. Through this network the Beckley is associated with more than 25 national governments as well as international bodies such as the EU and the UN.

Further to its unique role in hosting top-level policy seminars and forums, the Beckley Foundation Drug Policy Programme also recognizes the need for credible reference materials. In response to this, it has so far produced more than 20 much-cited academic reports and briefing papers, which are disseminated to academics and policy-makers around the world (beckleyfoundation.org/policy/reports.html).

The real strength of Beckley’s approach is that it works with the establishment in bringing together the highest calibre of scientists, policy analysts, policy-makers, and other academics to combine their expertise both in research into a better understanding of consciousness and its altered states, and on careful analysis of how society might more successfully regulate and control those substances that alter consciousness - substances for which society appears to have an unappeasable appetite. The foundation aims to continue working toward these important goals and hopes that others will come to share in its future successes in extending the frontiers of research and policy. •

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