

A version of this article original appeared in Druglink: 20 (5) September/October 2005, under the title: 'Flushing out the truth about drugs'.

“The Society of the Spectacle”

Two decades of moral ambiguity over Lifeline Publications

“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation”.

Guy Debord – the Society of the Spectacle 1967



A poll among 500 art experts recently voted an old white urinal that had the words 'R Mutt 1917' scrawled on the side, as the most influential modern artwork of all time. When the sculpture entitled 'Fountain' was first exhibited it caused outrage. This of course was exactly what the artist - Marcel Duchamp - had intended. Duchamp was questioning what is or isn't art and was (quite literally) taking the piss out of the avant-garde art movement. However, any attempt at putting Duchamp's exhibit to its original intended function would have led to disappointment (and wet feet), as it was not plumbed in. To relieve themselves, the (male) art lovers would have to go to the toilet and in privacy without any fuss or outrage, pee into an identical porcelain pot. Fountain had imbued a urinal with meaning but relieved it of a practical function.

20 years ago in my first week as a Lifeline worker, I went to register with the local G.P. There on the surgery wall was a cartoon poster produced by Greater Manchester Police's Public Relations Department. (illustrated) *"Drugs Mean Death – It's the only thing addicts can look forward to"*. It featured a 'bogey man' drug user (his identity cunningly disguised) and helpfully pointed out *"some of the tell tale signs to look out for"*: one these tell tale signs was *"suspect suddenly developing an appetite for boiled sweets"*. At the bottom was a cheery little drawing of a grave with the words *"your children???"* written on it. The poster had no contact point for further advice or help, so what was its intended function and what was its meaning? Tick one box only.



- A. To end the scourge of drug use once and for all?
- B. To help parents work out if their children were on smack or confectionary?
- C. To be seen to be doing something about the latest moral panic by re-affirming the identity of society's 'folk devils'?

*"Fear leads to anger
 Anger leads to hatred
 Hatred leads to suffering".
 (Master Yoda: Star Wars; Episode 1; The Phantom Menace)*

By the following year, the first Lifeline Publication '**Smack in the Eye**' had already been banned by several professional organisations before it was even printed. The pilot edition of just 500 copies caused the Crown prosecution service to interview us twice after complaints from a director of Social Services and we were instructed by every one of the dozen or so of Greater Manchester drug services to remove their contact details from the back; It received national and international press coverage, was commended by the World Health Organisation and discussed in the House of Lords. Our solicitors advised us that we might well be prosecuted; they just weren't sure what laws if any we were breaking. Reviews were mixed.

"...I think you are nothing more than a bunch of foul mouthed perverts unfit to associate with normal decent people. As for the scum you claim to

help, I think their own perverse lifestyle has been responsible for the cesspit of degradation they now choose to inhabit".

Extract from a letter sent to Lifeline from a tranquilliser support group about the pilot issue of 'Smack in the Eye' 1987

They called us grossly offensive and pornographic (Nous?). They accused us of just about every politically correct 'ism' and 'obia" they had invented (and a few we'd never heard of). They have told us we were a 'threat to the youth of Britain' and that we would 'burn in the fires of hell for our sins'. Heavens to Betsy, they have even accused us of poking fun at the way our society deals with drug users!

William of Baskerville: *But what is so alarming about laughter?*

Jorge de Burgos: *Laughter kills fear, and without fear there can be no faith, because without fear of the Devil there is no more need of God.*

From the name of the rose by Umberto Eco

But who are they? The medical profession, the 'caring' professions: prison officers; the police; concerned parents; journalists, civil servants, the government? People from all of the above groups have attacked us, but people from those same groups have stuck their necks out and supported us. Some because they understood what we were doing, others because they saw how effective our publications were with the target group. Then as now, there is no consensus in our society about drugs, language, good taste, humour, sex or personal morality.

"Most people found 'The Man with No Bollocks' offensive, we cannot leave the comic around the project as it creates unhelpful conversations".

Female drug worker, Smack in the Eye research 1992

"Me and my mates like to read it when were 'off our box', it makes it even funnier".

Female drug user, Smack in the Eye research 1992

"No one understands our sense of humour towards drugs and ourselves.... in my sometimes very painful depression, Smack in the Eye makes me laugh when nothing and no one else can".

Female drug user, Smack in the Eye research 1992

Ten years later and the world had moved on, or so we thought. In 2002 we were flooded, burgled, threatened with arrest and loss of funding for our treatment services, we had most of the right wing press after our blood and government departments tried to put us out of business. And then there was the Home Affairs Select Committee (HASC). I was invited to talk to them over dinner and the following day they visited the publications department. I spent a considerable time trying to politely explain the concepts of specific targeting, health and communication theory, the reasons why primary prevention has failed and the need for an evidence base for harm reduction communications,

“MPs demand cuts in funds for agencies (Lifeline) accused of promoting drug use....One senior MP said: “I was truly appalled at some of the leaflets we saw. They are practically guides to becoming a drug addict and make little or no effect to persuade people not to take drugs”
Sunday Telegraph. May 12th 2002

We were back in the land of ‘Drugs Mean Death’. This is not about the function of providing drug information it is about meaning and the perceived values of society. As many of us have now come to realise an evidence base will always play second fiddle to politics and morality when it suits. In their press release, the dozen or so main points of the report examining the whole of the government’s drug policy were summarised. We were number 11.

“11. We acknowledge the need to provide realistic drugs education, but we believe that examples such as the Lifeline leaflet cross the line between providing accurate information and encouraging young people to experiment with illegal drugs. We believe that publicly funded organisations involved in educating impressionable young people about drugs should take care not to stray across this line”. (para 207)
THE GOVERNMENT’S DRUGS POLICY: IS IT WORKING? HASC 2002.

They **‘believed’** we had crossed an imaginary line (I’ve looked but I still can’t find it). It was interesting to see the leaflet they picked on. It wasn’t our guides featuring information on safer injecting, this is now accepted as good practice; it wasn’t Peanut Pete or our Safer Dancing information, they now base there own policies on the work we had pioneered in the 90’s. It wasn’t advice on safer drug use at all (you would look pretty silly calling for cannabis to be reclassified and then complain about a cannabis leaflet). It wasn’t even sexual images or swearing they objected to; it was one line taken from one leaflet “How to survive your Parents discovering that you are a drug user”. This had originally appeared in Smack in the Eye. The line was “Don’t get caught in the first place”.

We are specialist health educators and designers who work for a charity that aims to help drug users. We produce our publications then as now, by working extensively with the target group, to make sure the message is relevant, understood and entertaining. They are designed as messages that are perceived to come from within the various drugs sub cultures. The stories we tell reflect the reality and morality that we find within those cultures. When you meet groups of drug users and attempt to see the world through their eyes (I know you’ll find this hard to believe) ‘helping drug users break the cycle of drugs and crime’ or getting caught as it used to be called in the old days, is not something many feel is in their best interest. Do you reinforce societies perceived chemical Calvinistic values in a message aimed at a group of people already demonised, imprisoned and cast out by that society because of their drug use? Or do you take sides with the people you are supposed to be helping? It is not always possible to do both.

Smack in the Eye was tossed like a health education grenade into the cobwebbed world of what passed for drug education at the time. Two decades later providing safer drug use information has become an industry. But the world always changes. The priority of drug services has shifted from an aim of helping people with drug problems to an aim of reducing the level of drug related crime. How the drug information industry responds to a criminal justice and civil and human rights agenda will be interesting.

We were fully aware that our approach to “Telling the truth about drugs” would cause outrage and make us a target. We also understood that the provision of information for drug users didn’t exist in a moral vacuum in the 1980’s and it doesn’t now. Evidence bases are irrelevant when you are really up against morality. We now have toilets that are plumbed in and working, but let us not forget sometimes a well-placed old urinal can change the world.