Tobacco and alcohol should be classed as dangerous drugs

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

Tobacco and alcohol should be rated as potentially more harmful drugs than illegal substances such as ecstasy and lysergide (LSD), says an influential report from MPs.

The parliamentary science and technology committee wants a major overhaul in the United Kingdom's ABC classification system for categorising drugs.

The committee, which published its report into the classification of drugs last week, said that the current classification system was not useful because it lacks consistency in the way some drugs are classified.

MPs argue that there should be a "decoupling of the penalties and the harm ranking of drugs" because the classification system is seen by police as being of minor importance, so it is not making

criminal penalties proportional to the harm that drugs do.

Alcohol and tobacco should be included in a more scientific approach to a scale, says the report, as this would give the public a better sense of the relative harms involved.

Together, tobacco and alcohol cause about 40 times the total number of deaths from all illegal drugs combined.

A new league table of drugs and the harm they do has been developed by Professor David Nutt of the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, the government's scientific advisory body on drugs policy, and Colin Blakemore, the chief executive of the Medical Research Council.

Professor Blakemore said that under the alternative system for categorising drugs he had worked on, alcohol would prob-

ably be listed as a class A drug and tobacco as a class B drug.

"We included tobacco and alcohol because the public is

The public should recognise the relative dangers of drugs, alcohol, and tobacco

very familiar with the harm associated with them. We felt it was good for the public to get a handle on the harm of other drugs if they were set side by side."

The new league table, which has not yet been published but has been submitted to the Home Office for consideration, is outlined in the MPs' report and places alcohol as the fifth and tobacco as the ninth most harmful of drugs, both higher than class A drugs ecstasy and LSD.

The MPs' committee also criticised the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, calling its failure to alert the home secretary to serious flaws in the classification system a "dereliction of its duty," (see editorial p 272).

Drug Classification: Making a Hash of it? is at www.parliament.uk/s&tcom.

Changes to death certificates waste golden opportunity

Clare Dyer *BMJ legal correspondent*

The UK government's draft bill to reform the coroners' system and the way deaths are certified was strongly criticised this week by the House of Commons' Constitutional Affairs Committee, which said it would do nothing to remedy the "critical defects in the death certification system."

The MPs said that ministers risked "wasting a golden opportunity" to reform the system of death certification and investigation in England and Wales, which dates partly from Victorian times and partly from much earlier.

They cited evidence to the committee by Dame Janet Smith, the high court judge who chaired the Shipman inquiry,

that the bill "would go no way at all towards remedying the defects that failed to detect or deter Shipman." Dame Janet told the committee that if the reforms went through "there could still be a Shipman out there killing patients."

The committee pointed out that neither the Department for Constitutional Affairs nor the Department of Health was taking responsibility for death certification, adding, "If anything specific is being done at all, it amounts to tinkering at the edges of a system which has already been deemed unsafe and unsatisfactory by two government commissioned reviews."

Both the Shipman inquiry

and the 2003 Luce review, commissioned by the Home Office, found the systems for certification and investigation of death in England and Wales "unfit for modern society" and recommended major changes.

Harold Shipman was able to get away with killing patients for years because he filled in all their death certificates. In 2004, the Home Office, which was then responsible for coroners, proposed closing that loophole by providing for a check on all death certificates by a medical examiner in the coroner's office, which was expected to expose any suspicious trends.

Dame Janet concluded that Dr Shipman had murdered 215 patients in 23 years. She recommended that all deaths should be reported to the coroner for examination, but a spokesman for the Department for Constitutional Affairs said that the move would be costly and lead

to unnecessary delay and bureaucracy.

The MPs said that the draft bill would do much to improve the coronial system. The reformed service would have a smaller number of full time, legally qualified coroners serving larger jurisdictions, with national leadership from a chief coroner and a statutory Coronial Advisory Council. Coroners' powers of inquiry and investigation would be modernised, and bereaved families would have new rights and status, including a right of appeal.

The committee's chairman, the Liberal Democrat MP Alan Beith, said, "This is an opportunity not to be wasted. We must strongly recommend that the government rethink its plans, and that it incorporate reform of death certification." □

Reform of the coroners' system and death certification is at www.parliament.uk.