

Clarity needed on use of chemical weapons, says UK report

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A report examining the role of neuroscience research in military and civilian law enforcement contexts, led by a Queen Mary, University of London academic, has called on the government to provide clarity on the use of chemical weapons.

The 1993 [Chemical Weapons](#) Convention (CWC) prohibits the development, stockpiling and use of chemical weapons; however it contains an exemption which allows the production and use of [toxic chemicals](#) for ‘law enforcement including domestic riot control purposes’ that is open to interpretation.

The authors of the Royal Society report, *Brain Waves Module 3: Neuroscience, conflict and security*, say the CWC is open to some ambiguity, potentially leading to the development of incapacitating chemical agents.

Professor Rod Flower, chair of the Royal Society working group that wrote the report and Professor of Biochemical Pharmacology at Queen Mary, University of London said: “We know that neuroscience research has the potential to deliver great social benefit – researchers come closer every day to finding effective treatments for diseases and disorders such as Parkinson’s, depression, schizophrenia, epilepsy and addiction.

“However, understanding of the brain and human behaviour coupled with developments in drug delivery also highlight ways of degrading human performance that could possibly be used in new weapons,

especially incapacitating chemical agents.

“This is why it is so important that UK government is clear about its reasons for the changes made to its interpretation of the law enforcement exemption in the CWC. It’s absolutely crucial that countries adhering to the CWC address the definition of incapacitating chemical agents under the CWC at the next Review Conference in 2013.”

The report highlights the technology being developed in military context; in performance enhancement of troops and in performance degradation of the enemy. The authors call on the UK government to be as transparent as possible about research being conducted for use by the military and law enforcement bodies.

“The application of neuroscience research in the development of enhancement and degradation technologies for military and [law enforcement](#) use raises significant ethical considerations,” Professor Flower said.

“Support for this type of research is potentially diverting funding and resources away from other important social applications such as the treatment of neurological impairment, disease and psychiatric illness. This is why it should be subject to ethical review and as transparent as possible.

“The neuroscientists conducting this research also need to be aware that knowledge and technologies used for beneficial purposes can also be misused for harmful purposes.”

Provided by Queen Mary University of London

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