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UQ law academic to research emerging Australian drug concern

New research led by a University of Queensland legal expert will provide law enforcement agencies and criminal justice officials with a detailed analysis of the use and impact in Australia of the drug khat.

Associate Professor Heather Douglas from UQ's TC Beirne School of Law and Associate Professor Nic Lintzeris from the Sydney Medical School have been awarded \$78,000 from the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund for a two-year research project entitled Law Enforcement and Khat: an analysis of current issues.

Dr Douglas said a key element of the research would be to work with police and members of the community to develop information and tools for police to help them identify circumstances and appropriate responses where khat may be being used.

"There are growing concerns about the social, health and economic impacts of the use of this drug in Australia, particularly in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria.

"The project will synthesise available research on law enforcement strategies undertaken in Australia, the UK and the US to identify best practice.

"The project will establish law enforcement information material and protocols related to the use patterns of khat, its relationship to violent offending, search and identification of khat and charge issues for law enforcement officials. It will also consider police interview and judicial sentencing approaches in khat cases."

Dr Douglas said while khat was illegal in many countries, in Australia its legal status varies between states.

"Under Commonwealth regulations up to 5kg of khat per month can be legally imported for personal use by licensed permit holders. But in Queensland khat is listed as a schedule 2 dangerous drug in the same category as cannabis while its status in New South Wales is not clear.

"The project will identify information gaps in the community in relation to the legal status of khat and the effects of its use.

"Recent prosecutions in the US of khat possession have resulted in long periods of imprisonment, although some sentencing judges have expressed confusion about how to approach sentencing in such cases. And in some of the US cases, police have admitted that they have had difficulty identifying khat."

Dr Douglas said that when all stages of the project were completed in October 2011, there would be a clearer understanding not only of the law enforcement issues surrounding khat in Australia but also of the social and health effects particularly as they may relate to violence,

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Note: Catha edulis or khat is a shrub grown in many African countries and is regularly imported to Australia by migrants from African countries. Based on experiences in other communities overseas, it is likely that khat will develop as a concern for law enforcement. The shrub's leaf once dried is generally chewed for its stimulant effect, although sometimes khat is drunk as a tea. It is understood to be mildly addictive and has been associated with high blood pressure, stroke and psychosis. Its use has also been associated with domestic violence.

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