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Panelists at SIPA argue about legalization of drugs

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Four panelists with very different perspectives on issues concerning illegal drugs took part in a discussion in the Altschul Auditorium of the International Affairs Building yesterday. Approximately 50 students and faculty members attended.

Robert Strang, who chairs New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's transition team's Drug Advisory Group; Joyce Rivera Beckman, the executive director of St. Ann's Corner, a group which operates a needle exchange program for drug addicts; Robert Millman, M.D., chairman of public health at the Cornell University Medical College; and Dana Beal, a member of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP), spoke on the panel. School of Social Work Professor Robert Schilling served as a moderator.

Schilling began the debate by citing evidence which he said proves that a drug problem exists in the United States.

"The fact remains that the United States has the highest percentage of drug abuse in the industrialized world," he said.

Strang said he believes Giuliani's drug policy, which includes prevention and treatment of drug addiction and enforcement of anti-drug laws, could decrease the percentage of people in New York City who are addicted to drugs.

He added that the prevention

segment of the program would include drug education in city public schools for students from kindergarten through twelfth grade.

“We have the obligation to educate children about the dangers of drugs,” Strang said.

Strang also said Giuliani eventually wants to establish mandatory treatment for all drug offenders and stricter enforcement of anti-drug laws.

“However, we must realize that enforcement will not do the job alone,” Strang said.

Beckman, who favors the legalization of drugs, said she disagreed with many parts of Giuliani’s plan, including drug education in city schools.

“I do not want my kids brainwashed by schools about how bad drugs are,” she said.

Beckman argued that if drugs were legalized, addicts would be more willing to participate in syringe-exchange programs such as St. Ann’s Corner, thus making AIDS less prevalent.

“Law enforcement officials are worsening the AIDS epidemic, because addicts are afraid to get clean needles from us because they think they might get arrested,” she said.

Millman said he is opposed to drug legalization, claiming it would cause many more people in the United States to become addicted to drugs.

“The percentage of people dependent on drugs would rise sig-

nificantly by legalization,” he said.

Millman also said legalization would eventually lead to an increase in AIDS cases, since more people would be using drugs.

Beal argued that Holland, where marijuana is legal and addicts are provided treatment on demand, should be the model for U.S. drug policy. He said he thinks that if marijuana became legal, people will be less inclined to purchase illegal drugs.

“If we set marijuana apart from hard drugs, there would be a lot fewer people becoming addicted to drugs,” he said.

Beal also claimed a “magic-bullet miracle drug” exists that makes it easier to overcome drug addictions because it has no withdrawal symptoms, but the U.S. government has not allowed its testing because it is a psychedelic drug.

“[Governmental officials] have a bias against any drug, no matter how effective it is, which is derived from a psychedelic drug,” Beal said.

Beal also claimed that former U.S. President John F. Kennedy smoked marijuana in order to alleviate back pain.



PHOTO EDITOR—MOSHE SAMBOL

From left, Robert Strang, Robert Millman, Joyce Rivera Beckman, and Dana Beal debate drug legalization in a panel discussion yesterday in Altschul Auditorium.