

## **Decriminalizing Marijuana?**

There is a certain irony that as more and more people press for independence, Britain, the 'Mother country,' moves towards decriminalizing marijuana, Bermuda's number one drug of choice. Britain's move will no doubt bring consideration of our own legislation to the forefront. Certainly there are many issues involved and a positive aspect of the debate is that it provides a chance to review the pros and cons concerning the drug and an opportunity to educate ourselves about its more harmful effects. The issues are not clear-cut. Historically marijuana use, in the 1930s, was linked with violence, crime and aggression and this led to harsh penalties. Today that viewpoint has not proven entirely accurate. Research indicates that marijuana use is far less likely to lead toward aggression than alcohol, a socially and legally accepted drug.

While many might argue for legalization based on their individual views, the effects of the drug on a broad cross section of the community need to be considered before any change to its legal status is made. Conclusions on the drug's safety should not be based on broad generalizations or heated arguments but rather on the outcome of rigorous scientific research that has been carried out over the years. There is sufficient research to conclude that marijuana is not an entirely safe drug for all types of potential users. Just as we place warning signs on cigarette packages so the negative consequences of marijuana use should be clearly identified. It is the intent of this article to highlight some of the key issues in this ongoing debate.

Foremost in the argument against decriminalizing marijuana use should be the fact that it is considered a 'gateway' drug to other harder more addictive substances; designer drugs, cocaine and heroin. In studies comparing heavy to occasional marijuana users it was discovered that among the heavy users up to one-third displayed some form of substance abuse or dependence on other drugs. One study found that adolescents who used marijuana were 104 times as likely to use cocaine compared with peers who never smoked marijuana. This is an important risk factor particularly for individuals in families where there might already exist a history of heavy drug or alcohol use. It is also especially significant in recovery where the use of marijuana is known to have a direct link with relapse into harder drugs. This occurs because marijuana activates the same pleasure centers of the brain as the other drugs so re-activating the craving. This is referred to as a polydrug dependence.

An equally harmful impact of marijuana use is what is referred to as an 'amotivational syndrome.' This is where the user 'drops out' because of a loss of interest in goal-oriented activities. This can be particularly devastating for adolescents at the threshold of adulthood and in the process of making career decisions that will affect the whole course of their lives. In an effort to further understand this problem research has shown that there is a direct link between depression and marijuana use. That marijuana for first-time users could be linked with a drive to self-medicate depression. For adolescents in particular, this can create a dependency and make it very difficult to break unless the depression is also recognized and treated at the same time. Often this may require a brief admission to a rehab, extended care and/or medication. Sadly, for many, the option of getting this form

of treatment is well beyond their family's financial means. Once the habit has set in it puts enormous strain on a family which is likely already struggling with numerous other problems.

These findings correspond with my own experience working with male, drug-addicted clients in recovery. It has been this experience that motivated writing this article. Over 90% of those in treatment began their drug and alcohol use in early adolescence. An equally high percentage of those addicted to hard drugs started their drug history using marijuana. Many of these individuals did not complete their high school education despite their intellectual capability and were caught, later in life, in the trap of being unable to compete for other than menial jobs. The frustration they experience because of this makes it even harder to overcome their addiction.

Another area that needs to be looked at, particularly in Bermuda, is the effect of the drug on those members of the community who suffer from mental illness. Research in this area indicates that in young schizophrenics, heavy marijuana use contributes to an earlier onset of the condition and more frequent episodes. Of particular importance for adolescents who are already being treated for depression, ADHD, or other affective disorders is the danger of negative drug interactions.

Further studies have looked at the effect of marijuana use during pregnancy. Although there are no noted effects during the first few years of life, by age four the children have been observed to display increased behavioural problems and decreased intellectual functioning, goal-directed behaviour and impulse control. These results suggest that chronic marijuana use by the parent may impact the child's development particularly in the prefrontal lobe functioning of the brain. Other research points to an increased risk of non-lymphoblastic leukemia and other medical complications.

While there is sufficient evidence to suggest that moderate marijuana use for a healthy adult has little negative effect and is indeed less harmful than alcohol, clearly there are risk factors for many in our society. Much scientific research indicates that the young are especially vulnerable especially in our highly technological society. And it is among the young that Cannabis use is increasing. Clearly the issues are not straight forward and the application of legal restraints probably the most difficult to make. But perhaps the most important issue in all of this debate is the need for open dialogue and greater public awareness on the negative impact of the drug. We all have the freedom to choose what we do or don't do in our lives. We are far better off if we can make our choices equipped with the necessary information from the outset.

Finally it should not be overlooked that marijuana, like alcohol and other drugs, is a commodity. For many individuals there is considerable money to be made by promoting the positive effects and glamorizing the lifestyle while down playing the negative. At the very least it is the responsibility of good Government to take an independent and informed stance on the issue making sure that the public are well educated on the health risks of using the drug, just as they have, more recently, with the tobacco industry.

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