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Cannabis, Health and Public Policy

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, cannabis is in the news again as research reveals an upturn in use and governments struggle to develop a policy response that weighs the potential harm of the drug against the potential harm of drug policy itself.

Cannabis — sold as marijuana, hashish and hash oil — is the most frequently used illicit drug in Canada. Roughly one in four Canadian adults report having used cannabis at some time in their lives. And use has been on the rise among young people. For example, a 1997 Addiction Research Foundation (ARF) survey found that 25 per cent of Ontario junior high and high school students used cannabis in the previous year, up from 13 per cent in 1993.

One feature of the renewed interest in cannabis is the frequency with which questions on the subject have been put to political candidates. Their responses — often including admissions of cannabis use — are typically lighthearted, but the humor is perhaps lost on the hundreds of thousands of Canadians with criminal records for cannabis possession.

In October, 1995, Canada's House of Commons passed Bill C-8 — The Controlled Drugs and Substances Act, a law criticized for its continuing harsh approach to cannabis possession.

To deal with ongoing concerns about cannabis policy, the basic questions that must be addressed remain the same:

- What do we know about the health risks associated with cannabis use?

- What is the most effective and least costly way to minimize these risks?

- What is the most effective way to minimize potential harms resulting from our drug policy response?

CANNABIS USE

After caffeine, alcohol, tobacco and some prescription medications, cannabis is the most commonly-used psychoactive (mood-altering) drug in Canada. In 1994, seven per cent of Canadians 15 years and older reported using cannabis during the previous year while roughly one in four had used it at some point in their lives (Health Canada, 1995). These rates have remained relatively stable for the past 10 years.

In 1997, an ARF survey of Ontario students in Grades 7, 9, 11 and 13 found that 25 per cent reported using cannabis in the past year, up from 13 per cent in 1993. Use peaked at 42 per cent among Grade 11 students (Adlaf et al., 1997). These findings are consistent with trends in the U.S. and Europe.

Most cannabis users in Canada use the drug sporadically or experimentally. According to ARF's 1997 student survey, about two per cent of students had used it daily in the previous four weeks. Of students who used cannabis, 80 per cent had done so less than 40 times in the past year (Adlaf et al., 1997). Similarly, ARF's 1996 Ontario Drug Monitor survey, found that among the nine per cent of adults who reported using cannabis in the past year, two thirds said they used the drug less than once a month (Adlaf et al. 1997).

CANNABIS AND HEALTH

Some health consequences of cannabis are clearly known, while others — such as the effects of chronic exposure — are less obvious. There is no doubt that *heavy* cannabis use has negative health consequences. (For detailed documentation of research and reference material, please see Hall et al., 1994, and WHO, in preparation). The most important effects are:

- **Respiratory damage:** Marijuana smoke contains higher concentrations of some of the constituents of tar than tobacco smoke. As well, it is hotter when it contacts the lungs and is typically inhaled more deeply and held in the lungs longer than tobacco smoke.

Research has shown a link between chronic heavy marijuana use and damage to the respiratory system similar to that caused by tobacco. Long-term marijuana smoking is associated with changes — such as injury to the major bronchi — that leave the lungs open to injury and infection. Frequent, heavy use has been linked with bronchitis (Bloom et al., 1987; Tashkin et al., 1988). There is no established link between marijuana smoking and lung cancer. But case

reports of some cancers in young adults with a history of cannabis use are of concern. (Polen et al., 1993).

These adverse effects are, of course, related to smoking the drug, and don't occur when cannabis is eaten.

• **Physical co-ordination:** Cannabis impairs co-ordination. This brings with it the risk of injury and death through impaired driving or accidents such as falls.

North American studies of blood samples from drivers involved in motor vehicle crashes have consistently found that positive results for THC (the mood-altering ingredient in cannabis) are second only to positive results for alcohol. However, blood levels of THC do not demonstrate that a driver was intoxicated at the time of the accident. In addition, many drivers with cannabis in their blood are also intoxicated with alcohol.

Experimental studies of driving that show that cannabis use can impair braking time, attention to traffic signals and other driving behaviors. The studies found that subjects appear to realize that they are impaired, and compensate where they can. However, such compensation is not possible when unexpected events occur, or if the task requires continued attention.

• **Pregnancy and childhood development:** Cannabis use by women who are pregnant may affect the fetus. As with tobacco smoking, risks such as low birth weight and premature delivery increase with use.

The longer-term effects on children whose mothers smoked cannabis while pregnant appear to be subtle. Recent research suggests that exposure to cannabis in the womb can affect the mental development of the child in later years. By age four, for example, offspring of women who used cannabis regularly showed reduced verbal ability and memory. By school age, decreased attentiveness and increased impulsiveness were also found in children whose mothers used cannabis heavily (Day et al, 1994; Fried, 1995).

• **Memory and thinking:** The effects of cannabis on memory appear to be variable, and may depend on the test that is used. Overall, the effects seem to be modest. However, it's not yet known whether chronic use would produce serious impairments of memory, particularly if such use occurs during development. Several years ago, studies of adult cannabis users suggested that the drug has little effect on cognitive function. More recent research has demonstrated that long-term use produces deficits in the ability to organize and integrate complex information (Solowij et al., 1995).

• **Psychiatric effects:** Cannabis use has been linked to a number of psychiatric effects. The most significant is called cannabis dependence syndrome. A person with this condition will continue to use the drug despite adverse effects on physical, social and emotional health (Anthony and Helzer, 1991). Impairment of the person's behavioral control, combined with effects on thinking and motivation, can adversely affect a person's work or studies. The risk of dependence increases with use. It has been reported that one-third to one-half of those who use cannabis daily for long periods may become dependent.

There is clearly a link between cannabis use and schizophrenia, but it is not yet known whether cannabis use triggers schizophrenia, or whether schizophrenia may lead to increased cannabis use (Andreasson et al., 1987; Andreasson et al., 1989). Health professionals have identified a condition of "cannabis psychosis" following heavy use of the drug (Chaudry et al., 1991; Thomas, 1993). The condition disappears within days of abstinence. However, this disorder has not been well defined, and it is not clear that it differs from the effects of high doses of the drug.

Reference has also been made to an "amotivational syndrome" resulting from extensive cannabis use. While heavy use of cannabis may interfere with motivation, the existence of a syndrome with identifiable symptoms outlasting drug use and withdrawal has not been demonstrated. (This question may have been clouded by studies of the effects of cannabis use on educational performance in adolescents, in which individuals most likely to use the drug may have lower motivation to succeed academically.)

• **Hormone, immune and heart function:** Research has shown that cannabis can also alter hormone production, and affect both the immune system

and heart function. The implications of these findings for human health are unclear at present.

CANNABIS AND OTHER DRUGS

The link between cannabis and the use of other drugs is also of concern. In particular, people have questioned whether cannabis acts as a "gateway drug" to heroin, cocaine or other drug use.

There is a statistical link between the use of cannabis and other drugs. Cannabis users are more likely to use tobacco and alcohol, for example. They are also more likely to try other illicit drugs than those who have never used cannabis. As well, the earlier a person uses cannabis and the more he or she consumes, the greater the likelihood that the person will use other illicit drugs.

The reason for this link is less clear. It's likely, however, that the use of cannabis does not in itself lead to the use of other illicit drugs. For example, roughly one in four Canadians has used cannabis, yet only four per cent have ever used crack or cocaine. Similarly, just two per cent have ever used amphetamines and about half of one per cent have ever used heroin (Health Canada, 1995).

A more likely explanation is that cannabis use may be one of many social and cultural factors — including family relationships, mental health, peer influences, social attitudes and beliefs — associated with a higher likelihood of the use of other substances as well. In other words, the same factors that contribute to cannabis use may lead a smaller number of individuals to go on to other illicit drugs. This may also explain the statistical link between cannabis use and lower academic and professional achievement and other personal and social problems.

Cannabis and other street drugs are also linked by the very fact that they are illegal — a dealer who sells cannabis may also offer other drugs.

WEIGHING THE HARM OF CANNABIS USE

Many of the negative effects of cannabis are associated with long-term heavy use. As mentioned earlier, however, most Canadians who use cannabis do so sporadically and in small amounts. Certainly, the typical pattern of cannabis use is much different from that of cigarette smoking. For most marijuana users, damage to the lungs is therefore likely to be limited.

Given current patterns of use, probably the most important health effects of cannabis use are:

- injury or death resulting from intoxication — for example, from a traffic crash

- respiratory disorders and ailments linked to heavy use

- dependence on cannabis, arising in a small proportion of users.

By any accounting, the impact of health problems linked to cannabis is much less than that resulting from alcohol or tobacco use. Survey data from the U.S., for example, show that dependence on nicotine among smokers is several times more prevalent than cannabis dependence among marijuana users (Kandel et al., 1997). Moreover, the legal drugs tobacco and alcohol account for the bulk of the economic costs of substance use. For example, a recent Ontario study found that annual health care costs resulting from cannabis use were small ($8 million) when compared to those for tobacco ($1.07 billion) and alcohol ($442 million). (Xie et al., 1996; Unpublished analysis of economic cost data, ARF, 1997)

CANNABIS AND THE LAW

Under Canada's Controlled Drugs and Substances Act (CDSA), the maximum penalty for first-time possession of cannabis (under 30 grams of marijuana or 1 gram of hashish) is a $1,000 fine and/or six months in prison. Under this "summary" offence, offenders are not fingerprinted. However, all convictions, including discharges, result in a criminal record. For a second offence, the maximum penalties double to $2,000 and/or 12 months in prison. Any possession for personal use beyond the designated amounts is dealt with as either a summary or an indictable offence, punishable by a maximum seven-year imprisonment. Under the CDSA, possession for the purpose of trafficking, trafficking itself, and the production, import or export of cannabis products carry a maximum penalty of life imprisonment.

The Act also includes provisions allowing licenses to be issued permitting the cultivation of low-THC hemp for industrial uses. (see House of Commons, 1995; Government of Canada, 1995).

Much of the recent debate on how Canada deals with cannabis use occurred during two successive governments' efforts to establish new drug control legislation to replace the 30-year-old Narcotic Control Act (Fischer, 1997).

In 1992, the federal Progressive Conservative government put forward the Psychoactive Substances Control Act (Bill C-85), which proposed to double the maximum penalties for cannabis possession. The bill died when a federal election was called in 1993. However, it was reintroduced essentially unchanged by the Liberal government in 1994, first as Bill C-7, then as Bill C-8, the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. The bill passed through Health Committee hearings in 1995.

Following severe criticism, much of which focused on the severity of cannabis penalties, the committee modified the bill to allow first-time possession of marijuana (under 30 grams) and hashish (under 1 gram) to be dealt with as a summary offence only, rather than as a more severe "indictable" offence. The bill passed in the House in 1995.

As well, a sentencing clause was included reminding judges that "the fundamental purpose of any sentence... is to contribute to the respect for the law and the maintenance of a just, peaceful and safe society while encouraging rehabilitation, and treatment in appropriate circumstances, of offenders and acknowledging the harm done to victims and the community."

The Bill was forwarded to the Senate's Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs where — despite critical review and doubts expressed by the chair and some other members — it was passed in 1996 (Fischer et al., 1996). The CDSA was proclaimed law in late 1996.

Approval of the law by the Senate was accompanied by a call for the creation of a Joint Committee to conduct a full review of Canadian drug policies, including a look at the feasibility and potential effects of the decriminalization of cannabis offences (Senate Report, 1996).

The immediate response fell short of the Senate's recommendation. The House of Commons Standing Committee on Health called for presentations limited to harms caused by the abuse of licit and illicit drugs and proposals for a national demand reduction policy (Standing Committee on Health, 1996). These hearings were cut short by a federal election.

Much recent debate has focused on the negative consequences of drug laws. Although Canada's drug laws include imprisonment options for drug possession, sentences are subject to the discretion of police, prosecution and judges. A person convicted of cannabis possession with no prior criminal history usually receives a small fine (e.g. $100) along with an automatic criminal record. However, jail sentences for possession do occur, and are much more prevalent for repeat offences or defendants who already have a criminal record. Similarly, a criminal record for cannabis possession may influence defendants' standing in other criminal proceedings.

Given that one in four Canadian adults has used cannabis, the potential impact of the current law is substantial. Since 1965, there have been about 700,000 criminal convictions for cannabis possession (Canadian Criminal Justice Statistics, various dates). While many political candidates in the 1990s have admitted their past use of cannabis, Canadians who had been caught for the same behavior faced obstacles to career goals, travel and other concerns because of their criminal records.

Despite concerns about "harder" drugs such as heroin and cocaine, 64 per cent of 37,678 charges for drug-related crimes in 1995 involved cannabis, and the number of these charges was rising in some areas after a period of decline. Moreover, most cannabis-related charges, as in previous years, were for simple possession for personal use. There is also wide regional variation in drug enforcement within Ontario. For example, the per capita rate of arrests for cannabis offences in the rest of Ontario is three times the rate in Metropolitan Toronto (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 1996).

The current system involves significant costs to individuals but also to society. Canada continues to spend the bulk of its drug enforcement dollars on cannabis possession. For example, the majority of $134 million spent on drug enforcement in Ontario in 1992 was related to cannabis enforcement (Xie et al., 1996).

In 1995, a national survey found that 69 per cent of Canadians believed that our current cannabis laws are overly harsh (Health Canada, 1995). The hearings on Bill C-8 drew much opposition from policy, research, health and interest groups to the further criminalization of cannabis use. They warned that continuing a policy dominated by criminal law contradicted principles of public health, harm reduction and cost-effectiveness in drug policy. The groups included the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, the Canadian Bar Association, the Canadian Police Association, the Canadian Foundation for Drug Policy, the Toronto Public Health Department and the Addiction Research Foundation. On the other hand, support for the measures was expressed by the RCMP, the Canadian Chiefs of Police and others (see Minutes of the proceedings of the hearings on Bills C-7 and C-8 by the Parliamentary Subcommittee on Health, and the Senate's Committee for Legal and Constitutional Affairs; see also Library of Parliament, 1996).

THE LAW AS DETERRENT

Given the real costs of Canada's legal framework for cannabis control, it is reasonable to ask how effective the law has been in deterring cannabis use.

There has not been much evidence that modifying cannabis laws has directly influenced cannabis use overall. For example, a 670-fold increase in cannabis-related convictions between 1965 and 1980 seemed to have no significant impact on the rate of cannabis use. It rose steadily throughout this period before levelling off and then declining in the 1980s and 1990s (Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, various years). Other "natural experiments" — like the temporary decriminalization of cannabis use in some U.S. states during the 1970s and 1980s — did not lead to any significant changes in cannabis use patterns (McDonald et al., 1994, van den Wijngaart 1991, Single, 1989, Donnelly et al., 1995, Sarre 1994).

A number of studies have shown that the attitudes of family and friends, as well as health concerns, are more important than the threat of legal sanctions in influencing individuals' decisions about cannabis use. One ARF study found that Canada's drug laws had little deterrent effect among people who had been convicted of cannabis possession. The study found that 92 per cent of those convicted of possession reported using cannabis in the year after their trials. As well, the severity of their sentences had no noticeable impact on their drug use (Erickson, 1980).

Part of the explanation for the weakness of the law as a deterrent may lie in the fact that as few as one per cent of cannabis users will be prosecuted each year, and thus the risk of arrest is quite small. Indeed, while our drug laws are based on the concept of deterrence, there is good evidence that people obey laws primarily because of a general respect for society's values rather than for fear of punishment.

POLICY ALTERNATIVES

Because of its limited effects in deterring cannabis use, and its costs to society and to individuals, a cannabis policy dominated by the criminal law is less than satisfactory. The question is whether there are more cost-effective and less socially damaging alternatives.

Since the 1960s, there has been a good deal of discussion on this topic (Kaplan, 1970, Le Dain 1973, National Commission on Marijuana and Drug Abuse, 1972). There have also been some practical experiments with reforms. Most are categorized as "decriminalization" or "legalization." However, these terms remain ambiguous and are used in different ways.

Decriminalization typically refers to less severe legal punishment for cannabis use. Penalties are reduced within the existing framework of criminal law — for example, from jail to a fine — or are replaced by regulatory or civil-law provisions (for example a ticketing offence).

Some forms of decriminalization can be explicitly written into the law (*'de jure'*), while others can reflect how the law is applied through the discretion of the police and courts (*'de facto'*).

Two decriminalization models are commonly discussed. Under "supply prohibition," trafficking is punished but simple possession is not. Under "prohibition with civil penalties," simple possession is addressed through civil, rather than legal, provisions (see also McDonald et al., 1994).

In Canada, the complex division of powers between federal and provincial roles complicates the discussion. For example, federal law-makers could reduce penalties for cannabis offences or repeal the prohibition of simple possession, but it would be very difficult to replace criminal penalties with civil ones without the co-operation of the provinces. Another alternative would be to activate the federal "Contraventions Act," which provides the option of establishing a federal "ticketing offence" for cannabis possession. Again, though, it would probably be difficult to implement the legal provisions without provincial co-operation.

Legalization means that a particular type of behavior would not be directly controlled through the criminal law. This does not mean that there would be no legal control over the behavior. At the end of alcohol prohibition earlier this century, each Canadian province set up a structure with strict controls over the distribution of the newly legalized commodity.

All commodities in a modern society are subjects to some legal controls on purity, advertising, taxes and other issues. Substances with a strong psychoactive effect tend to be more strongly controlled than others. One major mechanism is the prescription system, through which both a physician and a pharmacist control access to a substance. A reduced form of this control is the requirement for some pharmacy products to be sold from behind the counter, involving only the pharmacist. In the case of alcohol, all Canadian provinces have a specific system of control whose goals include public health and public order. Either system could possibly be adapted to control the distribution of cannabis in the case of legalization, or a new system could be set up. The interest of public health would suggest that any legalization of cannabis in Canada should include legal controls on availability, the age of purchasers and users, and the context of use to minimize the harm from use.

A number of jurisdictions have adopted reforms aimed at finding more effective but less costly ways to control and regulate cannabis use. In the 1970s, the Netherlands decriminalized cannabis possession in a *de facto* manner, meaning that possession for personal use was technically still prohibited by law, but was tolerated in practice. The state also tolerates the sale of small amounts of cannabis through cafés, with the aim of separating cannabis from the subculture of other illicit drugs (Dutch Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, 1995; van Kalmthout, 1989). In the mid-1970s, some 10 U.S. states adopted decriminalization measures, most of them reducing first-time cannabis possession from a criminal to a civil violation subject to a fine (diChiari and Galliher, 1993; Single, 1989). A few European countries, including Germany, have maintained legal prohibition of cannabis, but police have ceased to lay charges against possession for personal use (Fischer, 1995). Over the past 10 years, some Australian states have officially turned cannabis possession from a criminal offence into a civil violation. The penalty is an "expiation notice" incurring a fine, with no criminal consequences (McDonald et al., 1994; Sarre, 1994).

In each of these cases, the reduced emphasis on criminal means for cannabis control did not lead to significant increases in cannabis use. In the U.S., for example, states that enacted marijuana reforms saw increased consumption in the 1970s, but even greater increases occurred in states with harsher penalties. At the same time, decriminalization led to significant reductions in arrests and law enforcement costs (McDonald et al. 1994; Single, 1989; Sarre, 1994; Donnelly et al., 1995).

From the perspective of harm reduction, there is evidence suggesting that these cannabis policy reforms may offer the potential of an overall net benefit to society.

There is much less evidence concerning the likely result of a partial repeal of laws against cannabis possession, or of full legalization. Such measures, naturally, would eliminate most of the direct costs and individual consequences of criminalization. However, there is a concern that at the same time this would lead to more tolerant attitudes to cannabis use in general, or to more harmful patterns of use. As a result, adverse health effects, lost productivity and the use of other drugs could increase. Moreover, the law would lose its role as a symbolic, educative instrument, in particular for young people. Such negative outcomes would be

more likely to occur if *all* modes of control were eliminated through a legalization model.

A related issue under the legalization option would be the quality of cannabis. That is, it can be argued that under a public health model of cannabis policy reform, the government or an authorized agency would have to regulate the quality of cannabis, in the same way that the Liquor Control Board of Ontario now monitors the quality of alcoholic beverages in Ontario.

Overall, Canadians appear to support an alternative to the current system. In 1994, a Health Canada survey showed that 27 per cent of Canadians believed possession should be legal; 42 per cent believed cannabis possession should be illegal, but subject to a fine or non-jail sentence; 17 per cent felt it should be illegal, with even a first offence subject to a jail sentence; and 14 per cent had no opinion (Health Canada, 1995). In an October 1997 CTV/Angus Reid poll, 51 per cent of Canadian adult respondents believed that possession of marijuana should not be a crime.

There has also been growing debate around the issue of marijuana use for medical purposes in Canada. Some of this has been fuelled by three recent state referenda in the U.S., two of which allow physicians to recommend or prescribe marijuana use for severely ill patients. In 1997, two Canadian court cases have also mounted challenges to the prohibition on the medical use of cannabis.

There is considerable anecdotal evidence that marijuana use may alleviate the nausea effects of cancer treatment, may function as an appetite stimulant with patients suffering from the AIDS "wasting syndrome," and may help in the treatment of glaucoma as well as multiple sclerosis symptoms (Hall et al., 1994). While synthetic THC (Marinol) is available for prescription in pill form, it is less rapidly absorbed than THC in smoked marijuana and is less practical for some users who experience digestive problems. However, there have not been very many large-scale and controlled experiments testing the suggested medicinal effectiveness of smoked marijuana. In general, such research has not been encouraged or funded, although the U.S. government has recently promised to make increased research funds available.

It is currently illegal in Canada for doctors to prescribe or provide marijuana for medicinal use. The federal government has not indicated any immediate plans to alter this situation. A federal official has stated that to date, no one has "provided the necessary scientific evidence to demonstrate that marijuana would be safe and effective as a medicinal product," but that licenses for research of such effectiveness can be obtained and that the health authorities would not "wish to deny Canadians the benefit of any substance with proven therapeutic value." (Rowsell, 1997).

The October 1997 CTV/Angus Reid opinion poll indicated that 83 per cent of Canadians think that it should not be illegal for people to use marijuana for medicinal purposes. Cannabis buyers' networks and clubs through which marijuana is made available for informal medical usage can now be found in many Canadian cities.

CONCLUSION: A PUBLIC HEALTH APPROACH

The Addiction Research Foundation believes that the use of alcohol, tobacco and other drugs should be seen primarily as a public health issue rather than one dominated by moral or legal principles. The main goal of public policy and practice should be twofold: to reduce the harm and cost from drug use, and to minimize the harms and costs of drug policy.

We know from an extensive body of research that cannabis use carries with it health and safety risks; however, these risks increase disproportionately with the amount, pattern and frequency of use (Hall et al., 1994). Public policy should aim to minimize the harm associated with cannabis use both to individuals and to society.

There are a number of unanswered questions about the specific health and behavioral effects associated with cannabis use, and their impacts on public health and safety. There is thus a need for continued scientific research. In the meantime, public education concerning the known risks associated with cannabis at different patterns of use should remain a central part of an overall prevention strategy.

At the same time, it is legitimate to ask how our system of legislation and enforcement can play a more

constructive role in reducing cannabis-related harm. The current legal framework imposes high costs on society and on individuals without clear evidence that it contributes to reducing either the harm resulting from cannabis or its use.

Canada had a thorough review of its cannabis laws and policies by the Le Dain Commission in the early 1970s (see Le Dain Commission, 1973). The commission called for "the gradual withdrawal of criminal sanctions against drug users" in general, and the decriminalization of cannabis use in particular. The recommendation was ignored.

It is time again to consider whether policy reforms in Canada can reduce the level of harm currently resulting from cannabis use. The Addiction Research Foundation recommends a full review of drug policy. Such a review would include a thorough investigation of the issues outlined in this paper. They include the available evidence concerning both the risks associated with cannabis use and options to reduce individual and social harm.

A re-examination of the cannabis laws should be undertaken in the context of a general modernization of Canada's laws governing all psychoactive substances. This process should involve a broad-based consultation with the federal and provincial governments, as well as relevant non-governmental organizations with expertise in the reduction of drug-related harm. Such a review must, of course, weigh the potential benefits from reduced harm against the potential impact on public health and social problems resulting from any increase in the availability of cannabis.

In a balanced social policy, it is our view that the justifiable concern with the health effects of cannabis is not incompatible with a less punitive legal response to the user.

December 1997

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