



# The Eden Lodge Practice

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## Cannabis: How harmful is ‘Relative Harms’?

A link on the indispensable ‘Daily Dose’, led me to a letter from Release dated 6 December 2005, to the Home Secretary, reminding him of the reasons leading to the Government’s decision to downgrade cannabis. Whilst I have no doubt that the evidence leading to this decision, had been meticulously researched, it did not seem to correspond with what I was seeing in my practice by way of anxiety disorders and depression, not mention a propensity for violence. Using the Beck self assessment inventory instrument, together with the criteria stipulated in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV.) anxiety and depression in almost every case, measured ‘moderate’ to ‘severe’, and in a few case extremely severe. A further cause of concern was the notable lethargic attitude displayed, although this was not evident in all cases. Without exception all clients used alcohol to the point of hazardous drinking, whilst a few met the DSM-IV criteria for ‘Alcohol Abuse’.

In view of the above, I decided to review what ever research I had in my files, or was available on the net, the outcome of which, left me with some grave concerns, because much of it, the UKCIA website in particular, gives out the message that cannabis is harmless, without bothering to offer any supporting evidence in support of their claims. I also note that the US Office of Drug Control Policy, (USODCP) together with other relevant sources take an entirely different view of cannabis. I therefore thought it might be interesting if I were to reiterate the then Home Secretary’s reasons for downgrading as they appeared in the letter from Release, together with the views of UKCIA, both of which appear in italics, followed by opposing views from scientific and medical sources, together with my concerns.

*‘That the UK’s Drug Laws should accurately reflect the relative harms of drugs in accordance with the available scientific and medical advice.’*

Patton, et al, in a paper published in the British medical Journal (BMJ) in 2002 noted the following: (1)

- a. Frequent recreational use of cannabis has been linked to high rates of depression and anxiety in cross sectional surveys.
- b. A strong association between daily use of cannabis, depression, and anxiety in young women persists after adjustment for intercurrent use of other substances.

- c. Frequent cannabis use in teenage girls predicts later higher rates of anxiety and depression.

Given the increasing cost to the NHS of interventions for anxiety and depression, I would have thought that the use of any substance, which induces or exacerbates either condition, would have been strongly discouraged, rather than advanced as relatively harmless.

- *‘That cannabis is not as harmful to health as other class B drugs like the amphetamines’.*

A comparison of substances and their mental affects in DSM-1V reveal the following common effects of cannabis and amphetamines. Delirium: Psychotic disorder: Anxiety disorder: Dependence, and Abuse: Intoxication. In addition, deFonesca et al (2) concluded that the use of cannabis resulted in similar changes to the brain as both cocaine and heroin use. In 2000 the American Department of Health (3) indicated that more young people were in treatment for marijuana dependency than all other illegal drugs combined.

It seems to me that although the Home Secretary’s statement is fundamentally true, however given the seriousness of the common effects, I would have thought that a message emphasising the relative dangers, rather than the relative harmlessness would have been in the greater interest of our society.

- *‘That the reclassification would help the Government to convey an effective and credible message- to young people in particular- about the dangers of misusing drugs.’*
- *‘That all controlled drugs, including cannabis are harmful and that no one should take them; and that the law reflect the relative harmfulness of drugs accurately is vital to this message being open, honest and balanced.’*

I disagree with the first statement, if one is speaking about the dangers of drug misuse and *‘relative harmfulness’* and then immediately downgrades a drug, it’s more likely to carry a message that it is relatively harmless, which in turn is all too easily misconstrued as harmless, especially by those whose minds lack clarity, and perception, as the result of cannabis misuse, (4) a message that is reinforced by UKCIA stating that cannabis is *‘remarkably safe’*. In addition, there are other health concerns, which although not directly related to other illicit substances, might be considered as further reasons for actively discouraging the use of cannabis:

Cannabis smokers have a heightened risk of lung infection (5) Long term users may increase the risk of chronic cough, bronchitis, emphysema, together with cancer of the head neck and lungs. (6) That smoking three or four joints is as bad for our lungs as smoking 20 cigarettes.(7) Smoke from cannabis contains 50-70 per cent more carcinogenic hydrocarbons than ordinary tobacco smoke.(8):

In view of the above, and, the strong messages that we have been receiving for some years, about the dangers of smoking, together with the concerted efforts to introduce a virtual ban on smoking, why on earth did Mr. Blunkett, see fit to send out a message that cannabis is relatively harmless? Taken to its logical conclusion, or in this case illogical conclusion, we may not be permitted to light up an ordinary cigarette in public, but it's OK to light up a 'joint'.

Perhaps Mr. Blunkett took the advice on the UKCIA web site:

*'Cannabis is remarkably safe for most people-if it's treated with respect, it's unlikely to cause problems to health or well-being, there's no toxic overdose potential with cannabis so unlike almost every other substance you can't die from its drug effect by taking too much of It'*

Unless the warnings on cigarette packets, such as 'Smoking Kills', are untrue, that statement would have to be regarded as disingenuous. Further, with Charles Clarke now suggesting that quantities for 'personal use' could be increased to sufficient to roll 500 'spliffs', then assuming an average consumption of 10 a day, we have people smoking the equivalent of 50 cigarettes a day for seven weeks, which, if we listen to UKCIA and one or two other like minded groups is 'remarkably safe'. On the other hand the more likely scenario is stoned, possibly psychotic, users suffering from anxiety, depression and chronic pulmonary congestion.

The second part of the Home Secretary's statement strikes me as good intent, but verges on contradiction, if a drug is harmful, why does he want to send out the message that it is relatively harmless?

*'The reclassification would continue to deter use of the drug (because of its continued illegality) while providing the police with an opportunity to focus on greater resources on priority areas like dealing in class A drugs'*

I found this statement confusing on three counts:

- 1) The presumption here is that the use of cannabis is dropping, well, whilst it is true that the more liberal attitude being shown by senior police officers in certain areas, has resulted in less arrests being made for possession, that does not necessarily mean consumption is down. As far as I'm aware organised crime is unregulated, and therefore not obliged to make any returns on imports to any government department, therefore, I'm unable to understand how accurate indications of whether consumption is rising or falling, can be made. Seizures of illicit drugs by Customs & Excise make for great headlines, reading between the lines can be revealing, inasmuch, that it is unlikely dealers would continue to import cannabis in the quantities reported, unless there was an increasing demand for it, further the quantities seized are often referred to by the authorities as the 'tip of the iceberg'.
- 2) If a report in the Guardian(9) is to be believed, Department of Health (DoH) figures show that drug centres are reporting growing numbers coming to them with cannabis related problems. Nine per cent of all those attending clinics site

cannabis as the main reason for attending, rather than any other drugs, this is twice as many as in 1994.

- 3) Since its illegality did not prevent use when it was class B, why should it do so when the offence is so much less? Insofar as providing the police with an opportunity to focus on dealers of class A etc; this seems to imply that the dealers who deal with class A drugs don't bother with B or C. Really? I was not aware that dealers were so 'class' conscious.

*'That following reclassification, the presumption against using power of arrest for simple cannabis possession offences committed by adults, would save police time for use in tackling more serious offences'*

There seems to be a message in the first part of that statement, namely, that the police can, or should almost ignore the problem of cannabis. That would certainly reduce crime figures, and judging by the reduction in the number of arrests made, that message has been acted on. However, assuming that violent crime is still a serious offence, we have to accept that based on the last set of figures from the Home Office, which showed that the latter had increased by 16%, the second part has not been delivered; that may in part be due to the link between frequent marijuana use and violence. (10) American research indicates that young people who use marijuana on a weekly basis are almost four times more likely to engage in violence. (11) In addition a sample taken from a number of cities in the states revealed that something in the region of 41% of male arrestees tested positive for marijuana. (12)

Notwithstanding the readily available evidence of the links between cannabis and violence, the UKCIA website carries the following message:

*'Unlike alcohol, the recreational use of cannabis isn't associated with acts of mindless violence'*.

Well, that's alright then, there's no need to let the facts spoil 'good news'.

The message that cannabis is less harmful, non addictive etc, etc, is hard to swallow, when I see evidence to the contrary most weeks; however that pales into relative insignificance when one considers that it is the most widely used illicit drug in America, accounting for approximately 75% of users. (13) Of even greater concern out of a total of 7 million users diagnosed as suffering from drug abuse or dependence, 60% are dependent on marijuana. (14) If that was not in itself a sufficient reason for sending out a strong message of just how harmful '*relative harms*' are, the sad fact that of all youth between the ages of 12-17 in drug treatment in 2000, almost 62% had a *primary* marijuana diagnosis (15)

What sort of message are we sending our children? The good news from America is that consumption showed a downward trend in children between 2001 and 2002,(16) I wonder if that's due in any way to the message that American children receive, that cannabis is a dangerous, *and* addictive drug.

Whether or not cannabis is classed as a B or C drug is irrelevant, what is important is that we stop sending out misleading, and or, devious messages. Downgrading a drug does not necessarily lead to a reduction in its use, no more than it necessarily leads to an increase; any increase in the use of any drug is proportionate to supply and demand, availability, and price, as evidenced by the increasing use of cocaine; messages that downgrading, or legalising cannabis lead to reduced use simply do not stand up to scrutiny, however that does seem to be the message of those who have an agenda to legalise all drugs are seeking to send out; legalising drugs will decriminalise them, it may or may not lead to an increase or a decrease in consumption, messages to the contrary are spurious.

Whatever the true reasons for seeking to downgrade or legalise, cannabis may be, it cannot in all consciousness be claimed that it's relatively harmless, or '*remarkably safe*', it is anything but; however, it will reduce crime *figures*, thus permitting our politicians to claim a decrease in crime, which, together with the message from UKCIA, will be about as credible as Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland, '*What I tell you three times is true*'.

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