

Cannabis and Mental Health

“Where There’s Smoke: Cannabis and Mental Health” –a recent report (Dec. 2006) released by the Mental Health Council of Australia, claims that the use of cannabis, particularly among young people, substantially increases the risk of mental illness and worsens existing mental health conditions.

The Council’s Chief Executive states that, *“There is now proof smoking cannabis has serious mental health risks”*. He goes on to say, *“The risk increases further if you have a family history of mental illness. You increase the risk a notch further still if you begin using at a young age when brain development is at crucial stages. And you increase the risk a further step if your use is regular and prolonged.”*

It was found that cannabis use makes almost any mental illness worse, often resulting in longer hospitalisation with treatment often being less effective. There is also a lower chance of recovery from a psychotic episode.

This does not mean that just because you use cannabis you will develop a psychosis. It is more complicated than that. Indeed, among experts in New Zealand, there remains some doubts that the links between cannabis and psychosis and especially schizophrenia, is by association rather than causal.

Cannabis is the most widely used illicit drug in New Zealand – particularly among younger age groups.

Regular users can develop a tolerance to cannabis meaning they need more and more to get the same effect.

Long term use can result in: respiratory illness; loss of motivation; impaired concentration and ability to learn; impaired sex-drive and lowered sperm count in men and irregular menstrual cycle in women; family/whanau/relationship difficulties; and educational and employment issues.

The report has been a wake up call for the way Australian authorities will deal with cannabis use. It should be a wake up call for the way New Zealand authorities do so too.

For too long, New Zealanders have been under the illusion that cannabis was a safe drug to take and its use should be normalised. That illusion has been proven to be a delusion.

The evidence is now overwhelming that cannabis use is extremely harmful to our mental health, our educational and employment aspirations and our development and maintenance of long-term relationships.

The answer is a multi-agency approach to harm reduction. It is far more than just a law and order problem. Its use is currently an authentic part of everyday life for thousands of New Zealanders. Changing cannabis misuse requires significantly more investment in research as to improved treatment methods, their accessibility and acceptability. Taranaki has skilled people in the field – just far too few.

Most of all - we need a high profile quality national education campaign that takes the ‘sexiness’ out of cannabis use and treats it with the disdain that so many people now treat smoking and binge drinking.

Getting the message right will help cannabis users reduce their risk of mental illness.

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