



## Cannabis is a dangerous drug

Cannabis campaigners are on the march. They want the drug legalised, and they want it now.<sup>1</sup>

The drugs lobby deliberately blurs the lines between medically-useful cannabis derivatives and recreational cannabis.<sup>2</sup> They give the impression that raw cannabis must be legalised to get medical benefits. That is simply not true.

Cannabis contains over 100 unique compounds, known as cannabinoids, and a few of these have been shown to have medical uses.<sup>3</sup> Certainly the Government should encourage clinical trials to approve new medicines. But cannabis itself is not a medicine. It

is a menace that wreaks havoc in many lives.

The dangers of cannabis have increased in recent years as high potency forms, known as skunk, become more common, triggering schizophrenic and psychotic episodes.

Christians want people to find the answer to their problems and pain in the good news of Jesus Christ, rather than seeking to escape them through intoxication.

Behind the headlines and misinformation, we must be clear on the dangers of cannabis.



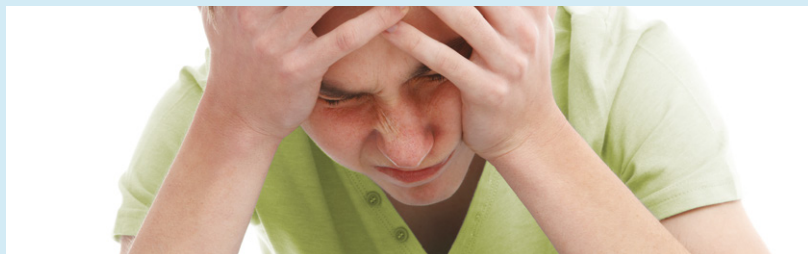
## CANNABIS DAMAGES MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

The evidence shows that cannabis is profoundly harmful. One of the biggest dangers is its effect on mental health.

Repeated studies show that smoking cannabis regularly doubles the likelihood of psychosis.<sup>4</sup>

Compared to non-users, those using skunk daily are more than five times as likely to be diagnosed with a "psychotic disorder".<sup>5</sup>

Teenagers are particularly vulnerable to these problems because the brain is still developing.<sup>6</sup> Using cannabis may produce harmful long-term



psychological effects. A new study identified a 37 per cent rise in the risk of depression in young adulthood for those who used cannabis as teenagers.<sup>7</sup>

Recent high profile violent offenders have been cannabis users, including the murderers of soldier Lee Rigby.<sup>8</sup> A 2017

study found that psychiatric patients who reported persistent use of cannabis were two and a half times more likely "to display violent behaviours".<sup>9</sup>

The physical effects of cannabis are also cause for concern. One study showed that smoking a joint

of cannabis carried a risk of lung cancer similar to smoking about 20 cigarettes.<sup>10</sup> Regular cannabis use is also associated with a range of other physical problems including chronic bronchitis, increased risk of heart attacks and possible reduced fertility.<sup>11</sup>

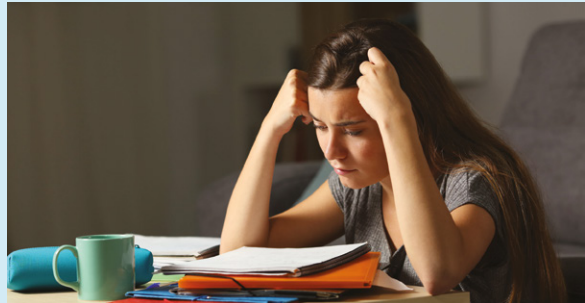
## CANNABIS IS A GATEWAY DRUG

In the UK, cannabis addiction accounted for almost half of those in drug treatment for the first time in 2016.<sup>12</sup> As well as being harmful in itself, cannabis opens the door to other illicit drugs.

Users of hard drugs like cocaine and heroin tend to have started on cannabis. A major UK study found that adolescents who used cannabis regularly were 26 times more likely to take other illicit drugs in adulthood.<sup>13</sup> Another study in New Zealand concluded that smoking cannabis in late adolescence and early adulthood was the “strongest risk factor for later involvement in other illicit drugs”.<sup>14</sup>



## CANNABIS IMPAIRS YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEVELOPMENT



Young people are by far the biggest group of cannabis users, and have the most to lose from legalisation.<sup>15</sup>

Regular cannabis use that begins in adolescence can seriously impair brain development.<sup>16</sup> A major study found that adults who used the drug persistently from their teens showed an average decline of eight IQ points, with noticeable loss of memory and concentration.<sup>17</sup> The effects were still noticeable even a year or more after cannabis use had stopped.<sup>18</sup>

Another study of 3,600 young people in Australia and New Zealand found that those who smoked cannabis at least once a week were almost twice as likely not to complete their education.<sup>19</sup> The effect remained significant after taking into account other factors that might explain the association.

## LEGALISING CANNABIS JEOPARDISES ROAD SAFETY

Drivers under the influence of cannabis are twice as likely to crash.<sup>20</sup> Cannabis use also doubles the likelihood of a fatal road accident.<sup>21</sup> Studies confirm that the drug slows reaction time and weakens attention and decision making.<sup>22</sup> Using cannabis and alcohol together “multiplies the risk of causing a fatal accident”.<sup>23</sup>

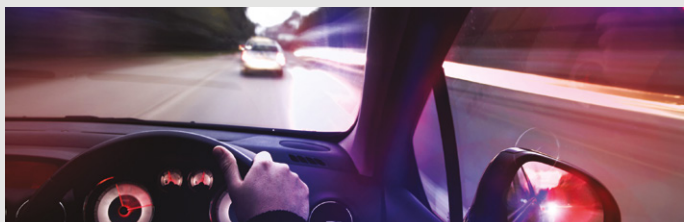
Drug driving is a growing problem in the UK, with the number of collisions rising by 40 per cent between 2006 and 2015.<sup>24</sup> Internationally, cannabis

is the main illegal drug detected in people injured or killed when driving.<sup>25</sup>

Legalising cannabis would only make the drug more widely available and remove existing taboos that currently limit its

use.<sup>26</sup> The result would be more accidents, and potentially more deaths. Lives are at stake.

Road deaths involving cannabis more than doubled in the three years after legalisation in the US state of Colorado.<sup>27</sup>



## CANNABIS IS ADDICTIVE

Around one in ten adults and one in six adolescents who use cannabis become addicted.<sup>28</sup>

People who use cannabis heavily can experience withdrawal symptoms including depression, nausea, irritability, loss of appetite and sleep difficulty.<sup>29</sup>



Compulsive users crave increasing amounts of cannabis, even when other areas of their life – such as family, education, or employment – suffer.<sup>30</sup>

NHS statistics for 2014 show that cannabis was responsible for over two-thirds of drug-dependence (not including alcohol).<sup>31</sup> And cannabis was by far the most common drug cited for young people in treatment for substance misuse (77 per cent), while alcohol accounted for 15 per cent.<sup>32</sup>



## LEARNING FROM THE PAST

The push to present cannabis as a relatively harmless drug isn't new. In 2004 campaigners convinced the Government to move cannabis from Class B to Class C, putting it on a par with sleeping pills like Diazepam or Temazepam.

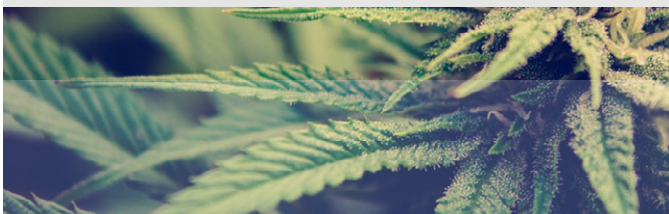
But mounting evidence of cannabis's harmful effects led the Labour Government to return it to Class B in 2009.

The Police Superintendents' Association of England and Wales said:

"The downgrading to Class 'C' sent out the wrong message, unintentionally suggesting that cannabis was harmless and legal."<sup>33</sup>

Going soft on cannabis leaves young people confused as to just how dangerous it can be.

Since 2009, the harms caused by cannabis have become even clearer. Yet the drugs lobby recklessly continues to press for a more liberal drugs policy. We must not repeat the mistake.



## LEARNING FROM OTHER COUNTRIES

Cannabis sales are predicted to overtake spirits in Canada as investors see the potential for large profits in the newly legalised market.<sup>34</sup>

In US states where cannabis is legal, use has increased more than the rest of the country.<sup>35</sup> It is now one of the fastest growing industries in the US.<sup>36</sup>

In Colorado there are more cannabis shops than either Starbucks or McDonald's.<sup>37</sup> Crime rates increased by eleven per cent in the state after legalisation, while the national figure went down.<sup>38</sup> A study found that cannabis poisoning among children under ten

years old rose steeply after legalisation compared to the rest of the country.<sup>39</sup> Cannabis products often resemble popular snacks like chocolate bars.

Legalisation hasn't served to reduce cannabis harms. Potency has risen sharply in the Netherlands and has been linked to the dramatic increase in people treated for cannabis problems.<sup>40</sup> Portugal decriminalised cannabis in 2001, and treatment for problems related to the drug more than tripled between 2008 and 2016.<sup>41</sup>



# Answering some common myths

## MYTH: "THE ECONOMY WILL BENEFIT AND CRIME WILL FALL"

It's naïve to think that tax revenue from cannabis use could pay for the damage caused by a liberal drugs policy.

A 2017 study found that the £11 billion tax earned

from alcohol sales in England is dwarfed by socio-economic costs to society, estimated at between £21 and £52 billion.<sup>42</sup> We can expect a similar pattern with cannabis, adding to the strain on an already stretched NHS and the criminal justice system.

But even more important than the economic cost of legalisation is the damage to people's lives. Most cannabis users are frequent users who started when young.<sup>43</sup> Cannabis suppliers know

this. It's profoundly wrong to promote an industry whose main profits come from exploiting people in this way.

Making cannabis legal would not reduce crime. It hasn't happened in US states that have legalised cannabis.<sup>44</sup> Criminal networks can undercut high street prices, ignore potency limits, and traffic cannabis more easily under the cover of a legal market. Canada legalised cannabis recently but the black market is expected to account for 70 per cent of sales in 2019.<sup>45</sup>



## MYTH: "THE WAR ON DRUGS HAS CLEARLY FAILED"

A true 'war on drugs' has not been fought. Far from raising the white flag on cannabis, we should consistently enforce the law.

For years, policy has dictated a soft approach towards cannabis offenders on the ground.<sup>46</sup> Despite this, the current law has a restraining effect. Most people have never tried cannabis. In fact, cannabis use has fallen significantly in the UK. In 2001/02, the percentage of the adult population who had used the drug in the previous month was 6.5 per cent. By 2017/18, it was 3.3 per cent. For 16-24 year olds the figure fell from 17.6 per cent to 7.3 per cent.<sup>47</sup>

Legalising cannabis is likely to undo this progress by sending the message that cannabis is safe. The legal status of cannabis is an important factor in how harmful it is perceived to be and how much it is used.<sup>48</sup> In a 2018 YouGov poll, over a quarter of 18-24 year olds who had never used cannabis said they would try it if it was legalised.<sup>49</sup>



## MYTH: "CANNABIS IS SAFER THAN BOOZE"

Even a small amount of cannabis can cause intoxication and can lead to anxiety, panic attacks, paranoia and hallucinations.<sup>50</sup> The idea that cannabis is harmless is unfounded.

An anonymous user told drugs awareness site FRANK that after smoking one joint he experienced panic attacks and felt like he was going mad. He wrote: "I'm not touching weed again... it can mess with your mind".<sup>51</sup>

There's no denying that alcohol abuse causes serious and wide-ranging harms in society.<sup>52</sup> But why would we risk adding to the problem by making cannabis more widely available?

Compared to alcohol, not many people take cannabis.<sup>53</sup> It is to everyone's benefit that its use remains relatively low.



# What about 'medical cannabis'?

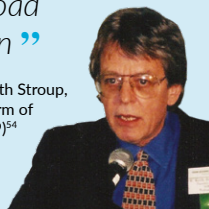
## PRO-CANNABIS CAMPAIGNERS AIM TO CONFUSE

Some campaigners see 'medical cannabis' as a stepping stone to legal recreational use. By linking the drug to potential medical benefits rather than its obvious harms, they can change attitudes and pave the way for full legalisation.

This approach deliberately blurs the vital distinction between cannabis itself and medically-useful cannabinoids. It attempts to equate smoking a joint with using a prescribed medicine.

“ We will use the medical marijuana argument as a 'red herring' on the road to full legalisation ”

Keith Stroup,  
National Organisation for Reform of  
Marijuana Laws (1979)<sup>54</sup>



## UNDERSTANDING THE RECENT CHANGE TO THE LAW

The Home Office has opened the door to unlicensed cannabis-based medicines. Since 1 November 2018, specialist doctors have been permitted to prescribe cannabis products that have not had clinical trials to check safety.<sup>55</sup>

This is a dangerous step. The Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs has warned that the Government's definition of 'cannabis medicines' is "extremely broad, with no reference to safety and quality".<sup>56</sup> It "could lead to wider harms, including misuse and diversion".

“ Anecdotal reports should not determine treatment policy for the population as a whole.”

The British Paediatric Neurology Association <sup>57</sup>

So far, the medical profession is seeking to limit the impact of the change. The NHS says "very few people in England are likely to get a prescription for medical cannabis".<sup>58</sup> Citing the risks, they caution that "clinical trials are needed before they can be used". Doctors understand the dangers of the Government's approach.

There was no need for this move. Before November 2018 cannabis was listed under Schedule 1 of the Misuse of Drugs Regulations

2001, reserved for dangerous drugs with no proven medicinal value.<sup>59</sup> Cannabis-derived products could be moved out of Schedule 1 after successful clinical trials.<sup>60</sup> For example, 'Sativex' was made available to help MS sufferers. Several other cannabis-based drugs are currently undergoing safety and quality checks.<sup>61</sup> This is the appropriate, evidence-based process for approval of a medical product, especially when derived from a dangerous drug.

In exceptional cases a patient could also obtain cannabis products not approved in the UK, through a special licence from the Home Secretary.<sup>62</sup>

Earlier in 2018 there were complaints that it was too difficult to get a licence in these cases.<sup>63</sup> Some media reports highlighted genuine problems around bureaucracy. The medical profession also raised concerns over barriers to further research into potentially helpful cannabis-based drugs.<sup>64</sup>

However, these problems could have been addressed by streamlining the licensing process, and reviewing obstacles to research. The sweeping change in the law is an unnecessary risk to patient safety.

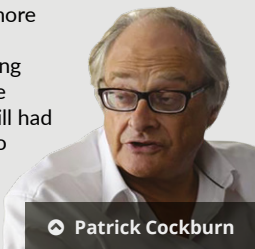




# Cannabis victims tell their stories

## "MY SON DEVELOPED SCHIZOPHRENIA"

Journalist Patrick Cockburn's son Henry was 14 when he started smoking cannabis. As a student he was diagnosed with schizophrenia after almost dying in an attempt to swim fully clothed across an estuary. He ultimately had to be sectioned and spent eight years in mental hospitals, escaping more than 30 times. Even after largely recovering and being able to live independently, he still had to take medication to keep his mind on an even keel.<sup>65</sup>



Patrick Cockburn

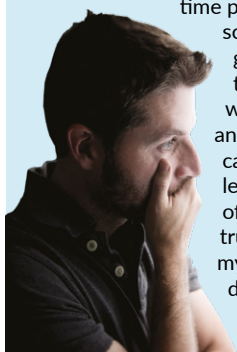
## "MY CHILD'S LIFE HAS FALLEN TO PIECES"

Josie Laurent's son Henri, a budding photographer, fell apart after smoking skunk from the age of 15. He suffers from psychosis and has been sectioned several times, after disturbing changes to his personality. Josie explained how skunk use led Henri to shut himself away for 20 hours a day. He stopped eating and heard voices in his head. She added that doctors "have no idea whether he will be able to get better, have a job, have a normal life".<sup>66</sup>



## "IT BROUGHT ME TO A VERY DARK PLACE"

Liaquat Zaman started smoking large quantities of skunk in his twenties. He's been slowly recovering ever since. "There was not much I wanted to do apart from get up, smoke cannabis, stay in bed, watch day time programmes.... I was scared of going out. I'd get anxiety. The only time I really went out was to buy some more and come back." His cannabis dependence led to the breakdown of his marriage: "The trust with my family and my wife had completely disappeared".<sup>67</sup>



## "MY SON STILL SUFFERS SIX YEARS LATER"

In a letter to a national newspaper, an unnamed parent told how their son started smoking cannabis at 14. They explained that they had thought their son's mood changes were merely "down to teenage angst". It wasn't until he was "at the risk of losing all that was dear to him" that he quit and within months he became happier. However, six years later he still "gets feelings of self-doubt, hopelessness and self-persecution that are painful to witness".<sup>68</sup>



## REFERENCES

[christian.org.uk/cannabisbrief-ref](http://christian.org.uk/cannabisbrief-ref)



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