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The **eReview** provides analysis on public policy relating to Canadian families and marriage. Below please find research on the adverse affects of cannabis use on teens, and why clear information is not readily available.

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Addictions Awareness Week: What's *really* with weed?

Honest "Drug Awareness" hard to come by

By Peter Jon Mitchell, Research Analyst, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada

It's National Addictions Awareness Week across Canada, a time to educate the public about the dangers of addiction and to "celebrate the joy of an addiction free lifestyle." [1] So what might our youth be learning? One program—courtesy of funding from Health Canada—to warn youth about cannabis falls dismally short. *What's with Weed?* was launched this week by Parent Action on Drugs and the website attempts to warn youth about the harm associated with marijuana use—all the while vowing not to judge the plant. The site features video of former addicts who entered rehab to kick their habits, yet at the same time encourages users to have a buddy when mixing drugs, tells teens to avoid suspension by smoking up somewhere other than school, and suggests teens should learn to use pot safely. [2]

Cannabis use actually causes serious long-term harm to young teens, yet marijuana's image has bounced between benign, spiritually uplifting, medically useful and downright healthy. The 2002 report from the Special Senate Committee on Illegal Drugs recommended the legalization of cannabis, declaring that it was scientifically evident "that cannabis is substantially less harmful than alcohol." [3] In recent years the movement towards decriminalization has been driven by publicity for the medical benefits associated with cannabis. And while debates over decriminalization are all well and good, they certainly have obscured some of the health realities, especially for teens.

A paper published in August 2006 in the *Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* surveyed longitudinal studies that explored the association between cannabis use and psychosis in adolescence. The authors called for more research, while sounding the alarm: There is significant evidence cannabis use precipitates schizophrenia in those already at risk due to personal or family history. [4] Other studies have suggested that there is a relation

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between cannabis use and psychosis particularly in teens under 15 years of age. [5]

A growing number of studies link teen depression with marijuana use. [6] A study published last year suggests cannabis use among teens may lead to depression. This study challenged the notion that teens turn to pot in response to feelings of depression, rather it asserted that marijuana may be the cause. [7]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a longitudinal literature review for the *Society for the Study of Addiction to Alcohol and other Drugs* discovered an association between weekly cannabis use among teens at age 15 and dropping out of school. The study reported associations between increased cannabis use and “lower grade point average (Resnick et al.1997), less satisfaction with school (Brook et al. 1998), negative attitudes to school (Jones & Heaven 1998) and poor school performance (Novins & Mitchell 1998).” [8]

And then there is the obvious: Often overlooked is the health risk associated with inhaling smoke of any kind. Cannabis smoke, just like tobacco smoke, paralyzes the cilia in the lungs, leading to infection, disease and immune deficiencies. [9] One marijuana joint deposits four times more tar in the lungs than one cigarette.

Support for decriminalization of marijuana is growing in Canada. University of Lethbridge sociologist Reginald Bibby reveals in his new book that 45% of Canadians support the legalization of marijuana. [10] He contends that the growing acceptance of marijuana use can be linked in large part to the Baby Boom generation – those Canadians born between 1945 and 1965, who, influenced by the American counter-culture of the 1960's, favoured legalization of cannabis in higher proportions than the rest of Canadians. In 1975, 43% of Boomers favoured legalization—among the rest of Canadians, support for decriminalization was at 19%. Even now, 48% of Boomers favour legalization, slightly higher than the national average. [11]

The legalization/decriminalization movement has been aided by the buzz surrounding potential medicinal benefits of cannabis—pain management and the prospect of temporary relief from tremors caused by chronic illness are among the better known. Bibby reports 93% of Canadians accept the idea of legally smoking marijuana for health reasons. [12] And pro-pot activists are still riding high on the widely publicized study released this spring that concluded that the chemical THC in marijuana may kill aging cells, keeping them from becoming cancerous. THC may combat some of the harmful chemicals in cannabis smoke. [13] Yet despite growing acceptance of marijuana use, Boomers would be best to put the bong down for a moment and consider the health realities of pot use, especially for teens.

As Canadians change their attitudes towards cannabis, a national drug policy dialogue is welcome. But when Canadian youth are among the highest users in the world with 42.7% of Canadian teens reporting that they have used the drug at least once, there should be some concern. [14] Drug policy discussion should be guided by current research, and as we debate decriminalization, we need to continue to inform youth of the health risks associated with smoking up. The legality of an activity does not determine its harm. Just because the Senate tells us cannabis is less harmful than alcohol does not make it healthy. And when a federally funded program like *What's with Weed* tells teens to budget their drug money, then its time for governments to show their own fiscal responsibility and stop funding such confusion. Surely our youth deserve better than this.

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Also see <http://www.whatswithweed.ca/weed/index.php>
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