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Cannabis: Social Harm or Social Good?

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We are told that the Misuse of Drugs Act exists in order to protect society from the ill effects of certain drugs. In fact, there is reason to believe that the original legislation in 1924 was more motivated by commercial interests than humanitarian ones. Especially given that in 1894 the British and Indian Hemp Commission decided against prohibition stating that social use of cannabis was acceptable. For the purposes of this article, however, we'll give the Government the benefit of the doubt.

The Government often reminds us that drugs are harmful and constitute a real and present danger to society. This is clearly a very bold statement to make, but does it apply to every use case?

The Government would certainly like us to believe that it does, but my experience would suggest that the truth is a little different.

The Government

The Government, and it's advisers, tell us that cannabis use presents the potential for real harm to society. In it's 2008 report, the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) notes that cannabis could have;

An adverse effect on those whose employment requires cognitive skills.

The report further states that there are *"unquantifiable, but real, economic costs to society."*

Although the section makes clear reference to the dangers of operating machinery (including cars), there's a clear implication (in my mind) that the use of cannabis can weaken a persons contribution to society. In effect, this section is saying that cannabis use can weaken the quality of work that requires cognitive skills.

It follows, surely, that cannabis users are actively causing harm to society, and damaging the quality of their own work.

My Experience

Obviously, I can only speak of my own personal experiences. I'd say, however, that in my case the evidence refutes everything that has been said above (apart from the dangers of operating machinery - I'm too sensible for that!)

Far less than a year ago, I was not self-medicating with Cannabis. I was, however, taking a range of prescription painkillers in the hope of controlling my pain.

Even leaving the pain aside, I suffered considerably. I spent an average of 18 hours a day unable to think clearly because of the effect of my medication. I consider myself a literate and intelligent individual, but it's very difficult to take advantage of this when you cannot remember what was said and done yesterday!

The combination of constant pain and strong medication led to me becoming dangerously depressed. As a result, I was put on yet more medication in an attempt to balance my mood. The problem is, my main painkiller -Tramadol - seems to react with every anti-depressant available. So I was unable to work for a period of months because of a combination of depression and the chemical interactions that my 'treatment' caused.

Any contribution my work made to society was stopped simply because I was unable to work.

Not only had my medication prevented me from working (and so contributing to society), but they were actively harming society, or more accurately - the tax payer. You see, like most patients in the UK, my medicine was paid for by the NHS. The cost of a prescription charge (£7.20) is absolute peanuts compared to the cost the NHS bears (some are well over £100 a box).

I've paid tax and national insurance all my working life, but I doubt that my years of contribution would even come close to paying for the medication I've taken over the years.

My Contribution Improves

Fast forward a few months, and I'm once again a contributing member of society. The Government would consider me a criminal, but I remain far more valuable to society than I was until recently.

You see, I no longer receive any prescriptions from the NHS. I have almost total control over which chemicals enter my blood stream.

Cannabis has stemmed the tide of pain, and in doing so has defeated a large proportion of my depression. Although withdrawing from Tramadol was unpleasant, I'm now free from the depression that it caused.

Whilst Tramadol very effectively clouded my mind and affected my judgement for a large portion of the day, cannabis does so for a maximum of three hours. The analgesic effects, however, last for nearly 18 hours.

Because my mind is clear and my pain reduced, I'm able to more effectively handle my workload. I can remember all that was said and done yesterday, and am able to logically state reasons for a decision. How much of a difference my job makes to society is debatable, but it's fair to say that I am making a far better contribution than I was.

Inadvertent Harm

The Government would like us to believe that every 'dealer' has links to terrorism, sex trafficking and organised crime. Given the number of users and 'dealers' in the country, this is a statistical improbability.

Again, let's give the Government the benefit of the doubt and assume that they are right.

The reason cannabis is controlled by these unsavoury elements is because the Government handed it to them, silver platter and all. By opting to prohibit rather than effectively control, the Government of the day ensured 'criminal' control of the very substances that they claim to be so dangerous.

I use the term 'criminal' very loosely as there is a dangerous implication inherent in the word. When we refer to criminals it stirs up mental images of all sorts of ne'er-do-wells. In reality, these 'criminals' may actually be relatively harmless individuals who use or sell cannabis for simple reasons. There may be no link to organised crime.

The term 'criminal' applies only because the Government has knowingly opted to brand them as such.

So although users are funding 'criminals' by purchasing cannabis, this criminality only exists because the Government has arbitrarily defined it as such.

There's little doubt that someone, somewhere is probably lining the pockets of a dangerous criminal, but this is less the fault of the user or the substance than that of the Government's failure to apply simple logic to the situation. Did they learn nothing from America's prohibition of Alcohol? The facts were there, and lessons should have been learnt, but for some reason all evidence against prohibition was

ignored (a practice which seems to endure).

Conclusion

Although the Government would like us to believe that cannabis presents a clear and present danger to society, my experiences suggest that this is not entirely accurate.

My contribution to society has increased significantly since I began self-medicating. Ironically the Governments stance has also ensured that I pose less of a financial burden for the NHS.

There are still some dangers posed, especially by those irresponsible enough to combine cannabis use with heavy machinery. However, as the ACMD notes;

At least 2.5% of fatal traffic accidents were thought to be due to cannabis use, compared with 28.6% for alcohol

So, whilst a danger is clearly posed, Alcohol still poses a far greater risk. Despite the danger, we've not criminalised alcohol and instead implemented a framework to ensure that those who do act irresponsibly can be punished. There are millions of drivers in the UK, each of whom is potentially at risk of death and injury from intoxicated drivers.

Given that this risk is not sufficient for the Government to criminalise alcohol, is it really fair to use the same argument to justify the continued prohibition of the safer substance, cannabis?

More Information

For more information on the harms to society caused by prohibition, HomeGrownOutlaw has a fantastic video [here](#).

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