

## **British Medical Association's Lancet Supports Marijuana Law Reform**

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Editorial

### **Deglamorising cannabis**

The smoking of cannabis, even long term, is not harmful to health. Yet this widely-used substance is illegal just about everywhere. There have been numerous calls over the years for the legalisation, or at least decriminalisation, of soft drugs, among which cannabis remains the most popular with all social groups. In this highly contentious area, the Dutch attitude has been often mentioned as the voice of sanity. In the Netherlands, customers of coffee shops can buy up to 30 g of cannabis for about 10 pounds (\$15) although the drug is technically illegal. The shops are not allowed to advertise, or to sell cannabis to individuals aged under 16 years.

Prominent among those currently calling for legislative reform -- and going further by making constructive proposals -- are police chiefs and city medical officers, people who know only too well that the existing policies in most countries are ineffective and unworkable.

Meanwhile, politicians have largely remained silent, seemingly afraid of offending powerful segments of the electorate or merely of being perceived as weak in the face of rising crime figures. When the occasional politician raises her head above the parapet -- as the British opposition MP Clare Short did recently in calling for a fresh debate on decriminalisation of cannabis -- the response is tediously predictable: widespread condemnation from political colleagues and overwhelming support from those who have to cope with the end result of political inertia.

In the case of Ms. Short, not only was she speedily reprimanded by the party leader, but also party officials claimed that their non-legalisation stance was entirely logical since legalisation of cannabis would "increase the supply, reduce the price, and increase the usage". According to a Home Office report earlier this year, the number of people taking cannabis has doubled in a decade -- without any help from "liberal" measures. Perhaps the politicians' real fear was that freedom to use soft drugs would automatically progress to increased use of substances such as cocaine and heroin. If so, they must have overlooked the recent Dutch government review which pointed out that decriminalisation of possession of soft drugs has not led to a rise in the use of hard drugs.

If the Dutch approach is so successful, why are changes afoot in The Hague to tighten up that country's drug policy? First Amsterdam's mayor proposed closing down half the city's coffee shops that sell cannabis, and in doing so he rejected a report by his health department in favour of legalisation of soft drugs. Then the Dutch government, which had made an election promise to legalise cannabis, last month issued a discussion paper which mirrored the Amsterdam plan. If, as expected, the Dutch parliament agrees the latest proposals, half the country's 4000 cannabis-selling coffee shops will close and the amount that can be sold to an individual will be cut to 5 g.



Since the government's own review provides no ammunition for such a change in policy, the real reason behind the new measures must lie elsewhere. One need look no further than the Netherlands' neighbours and co-signatories of the Schengen agreement, which introduced a border-free zone between the Netherlands, France, Germany, Spain, Luxembourg, and Belgium. When France, in particular, threatened to end the agreement, claiming that the Netherlands was the major supplier of Europe's drugs, some action had to be taken and the coffee shops became the scapegoat.

Leaving politics aside, where is the harm in decriminalising cannabis? There is none to the health of the consumers, and the criminal fraternity who depend for their succour on prohibition would hate it. But decriminalisation of possession does not go far enough in our view. That has to be accompanied by controls on source, distribution, and advertising, much as happens with tobacco. A system, in fact, remarkably close to the existing one in Dutch coffee shops. Cannabis has become a political football, and one that governments continually duck. Like footballs, however, it bounces back. Sooner or later politicians will have to stop running scared and address the evidence: cannabis per se is not a hazard to society but driving it further underground may well be.

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