

Dutch children of 12 'addicted to cannabis'

By Isabel Conway in Amsterdam

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Dutch schoolchildren as young as 12 are being treated for addiction to a powerful home-grown marijuana which is up to 20 times stronger than imported varieties, an addiction clinic in the Netherlands has revealed.

But while the age of regular and dependent cannabis users has dropped sharply in recent years, the dangers and health hazards of soft drugs have been "completely underestimated" by parents caught "in a flower- power time warp", Dr Romeo Ashruf, an addiction specialist, said.

The cannabis that Dutch children take, nederwiet, is produced in Holland and is up to 20 times stronger than imported varieties, he told Network 2's Bij ons Thuis television programme last night. It was not unusual for children as young as 12 to be addicted to cannabis and referred to drugs clinics by their GPs, said Dr Ashruf.

"In years gone by, the age group for referrals was between 16 and 21 but now it has gone down to between 14 and 19," he said. "Children of 12 and 13 who are addicted to soft drugs are also brought in. It is an alarming development."

Dr Ashruf, director of the Parnassia Clinic in The Hague, said that Dutch parents are largely unaware of the dangers because of the changes the drug has undergone since the 1960s.

"A lot of parents think back to the Sixties when flower power was at its height and they were passing around a joint from one to the other. It was the done thing then, and they just think their kids are doing the same and it's all a bit of harmless fun and part of growing up.

"What they fail to realise is that there is a world of difference between then and now. Kids don't share; they light up their own joint, and the drug they use is far stronger than in days gone by. Parents unfortunately massively underestimate the effects of using Dutch-grown nederwiet on their children and its potential to create dependency and health risks."

Research into the strength of nederwiet has shown it to have between 14 and 20 times more THC (tetrahydro-cannabinol) - the active ingredient which makes users high and encourages dependency - than imported varieties. Once a cottage industry, it is today a huge criminally organised business.

Bela Willems, 19, a former cannabis user, said he became hooked on the drug while still in junior school. By the time he was 16 he was smoking eight joints daily. Now he visits junior schools to warn pupils about the dangers of cannabis. "I come across kids in the last two years of junior school who are taking soft drugs regularly," he said.

Dr Ashruf said he was convinced that regular soft drugs use by young people in Holland can lead to addiction and a range of serious health effects. "

Cannabis causes addiction; there is no doubt about that," he said. "The children I am treating who are heavy users have arrested development. Somebody of 18 is mentally developed to the age of about 15. They become apathetic, they perform badly at school, they cannot sustain friendships, they have problems in all their daily relationships, they can't sleep properly, they are introverted and disturbed. Most of the time nobody - neither parents, nor teachers - realises that it is caused by their use of soft drugs."