

Cannabis: An apology

In 1997, this newspaper launched a campaign to decriminalise the drug. If only we had known then what we can reveal today...

By Jonathan Owen

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Record numbers of teenagers are requiring drug treatment as a result of smoking skunk, the highly potent cannabis strain that is 25 times stronger than resin sold a decade ago.

More than 22,000 people were treated last year for cannabis addiction - and almost half of those affected were under 18. With doctors and drugs experts warning that skunk can be as damaging as cocaine and heroin, leading to mental health problems and psychosis for thousands of teenagers, *The Independent on Sunday* has today reversed its landmark campaign for cannabis use to be decriminalised.

A decade after this newspaper's stance culminated in a 16,000-strong pro-cannabis march to London's Hyde Park - and was credited with forcing the Government to downgrade the legal status of cannabis to class C - an IoS editorial states that there is growing proof that skunk causes mental illness and psychosis.

The decision comes as statistics from the NHS National Treatment Agency show that the number of young people in treatment almost doubled from about 5,000 in 2005 to 9,600 in 2006, and that 13,000 adults also needed treatment.

The skunk smoked by the majority of young Britons bears no relation to traditional cannabis resin - with a 25-fold increase in the amount of the main psychoactive ingredient, tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), typically found in the early 1990s. New research being published in this week's *Lancet* will show how cannabis is more dangerous than LSD and ecstasy. Experts analysed 20 substances for addictiveness, social harm and physical damage. The results will increase the pressure on the Government to have a full debate on drugs, and a new independent UK drug policy commission being launched next month will call for a rethink on the issue.

The findings last night reignited the debate about cannabis use, with a growing number of specialists saying that the drug bears no relation to the substance most law-makers would recognise. Professor Colin Blakemore, chief of the Medical Research Council, who backed our original campaign for cannabis to be decriminalised, has also changed his mind.

He said: "The link between cannabis and psychosis is quite clear now; it wasn't 10 years ago."

Many medical specialists agree that the debate has changed. Robin Murray, professor of psychiatry at London's Institute of Psychiatry, estimates that at least 25,000 of the 250,000 schizophrenics in the UK could have avoided the illness if they had not used cannabis. "The number of people taking cannabis may not be rising, but what people are taking is much more powerful, so there is a question of whether a few years on we may see more people getting ill as a consequence of that."

"Society has seriously underestimated how dangerous cannabis really is," said Professor Neil McKeganey, from Glasgow University's Centre for Drug Misuse Research. "We could well see over the next 10 years increasing numbers of young people in serious difficulties."

Politicians have also hardened their stance. David Cameron, the Conservative leader, has changed his mind over the classification of cannabis, after backing successful calls to downgrade the drug from B to C in 2002. He abandoned that position last year, before the IoS revealed that he had smoked cannabis as a teenager, and now wants the drug's original classification to be restored.

http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/health_medical/article2368994.ece

Leading article: Cannabis: a retraction

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Yes, our front page today is calculated to grab your attention. We do not really believe that *The Independent on Sunday* was wrong at the time, 10 years ago, when we called for cannabis to be decriminalised. As Rosie Boycott, who was the editor who ran the campaign, argues, the drug that she sought to decriminalise then was rather different from that which is available on the streets now.

Indeed, this newspaper's campaign was less avant-garde than it seemed. Only four years later, *The Daily Telegraph* went farther, calling for cannabis to be legalised for a trial period. We were leading a consensus, which even this Government - often guilty of gesture-authoritarianism - could not resist, downgrading cannabis

from class B to class C.

At the same time, however, two things were happening. One was the shift towards more powerful forms of the drug, known as skunk. The other was the emerging evidence of the psychological harm caused to a minority of users, especially teenage boys and particularly associated with skunk.

We report today that the number of cannabis users on drug treatment programmes has risen 13-fold since our campaign was launched, and that nearly half of the 22,000 currently on such programmes are under the age of 18. Of course, part of the explanation for this increase is that the provision of treatment is better than it was 10 years ago. But there is no question, as Robin Murray, one of the leading experts in this field, argues on these pages, that cannabis use is associated with growing mental health problems.

Another campaign run - more recently - by this newspaper is to raise awareness of mental health issues and to press the Government to improve provision for those suffering from mental illnesses. The threat to mental health posed by cannabis has to take precedence over the liberal instinct that inspired Ms Boycott 10 years ago.

Many elements of her campaign remain valid today, however. The diversion of police resources into picking up easy convictions for cannabis possession was a waste. The rhetoric of the "war on drugs" tended to distort priorities: the current shift towards a strategy of harm reduction is a long overdue correction. Where we part company with her is on her view that the legalisation of all drugs is desirable because it would end the involvement of organised crime. So it might, but the fact that the possession of cannabis - and other drugs - is illegal acts as an important social restraint.

In fact, there is a strong case for believing that the present state of the law and of government policy is about right. The way the police enforce the law seems to be a reasonable compromise, while the emphasis of public policy is on information, education and treatment. The more the facts can be driven home about the differences between old-style hash and modern skunk, and about the risks to mental health, the better. And the more that policy towards drugs generally focuses on the causes of addictive or self-destructive behaviour, rather than locking people up, the better still.

The growing evidence of the risk of psychological harm posed by cannabis means that the time has come for us to reverse one of the positions with which - before the Iraq war - this newspaper was most identified.

We quote John Maynard Keynes in our defence: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?"

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- [Skunk: How the 'safe' drug of choice for the hippy generation became a serious health hazard](#)
- [Were we out of our minds? No, but then came skunk](#)
- [Rosie Boycott: Skunk is dangerous. But I still believe in my campaign to decriminalise cannabis](#)
- [Robin Murray: Teenage schizophrenia is the issue, not legality](#)

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