

Still waiting for the smoke to clear

Twelve months ago, in the Magazine, a father told how cannabis had turned his promising son into a wreck. So how has the family managed over the past year? As police relax procedures for children caught smoking the drug, he starts by lamenting another loosening of the law.

When I heard the news that police chiefs have quietly given out new guidance to police officers on the beat, so they do not automatically arrest or prosecute anyone under 18 caught in possession of cannabis, my heart sank.

It's not that I want youngsters the length and breadth of the land turned into criminals, I don't. It's just that yet another stark official warning against the dangers posed by this so-called soft drug, has been abandoned.

My family is now entering the eighth year of a nightmare brought upon us by this drug. My son James was 19, in his first year at university, when he fell ill.

He'd been using cannabis consistently for almost five years and become a very heavy user of skunk weed, a form of cannabis up to 20 times stronger than anything around when I was a student.

One day in July he changed. We didn't know it at the time, but overnight his and our lives would never be the same. He became psychotic and paranoid, and had a complete breakdown.

At least, he hadn't followed up on his plans to either go to Russia or Iraq for a holiday trip

The once happy-go-lucky sport-loving son, who'd had a girlfriend and masses of friends became nervous, anxious, and at times was totally out of it.

Even now, after all those years, that boy has still not fully returned.

But since I last wrote about this tragic situation, 12 months ago, things have changed. Some things have improved, some have not. The pressures on us all, as a family, are as great as ever.

Just over a year ago, a few days before Christmas, James packed up a little knapsack, came downstairs and said he was going out. My wife and I thought he might be off for the weekend, as he had recently taken trips to various seaside towns, staying in a bed and breakfasts for a day or two.

But that night he slept overnight in a major London train station, and the next day rang us from France. We were in a state of panic.

He then spent the next month or so travelling around Europe. He rang us from Madrid, Paris, Lyon, and so on. He tried unsuccessfully to get work. We were at our wits' end. Eventually, running out of money from his savings account and from us, he returned home.

Registered homeless

But it was to be only a short return visit. Just over a week later, he walked out again and several days later he turned up in Glasgow. At least, he hadn't followed up on his plans to either go to Russia or Iraq for a holiday trip.

NEW POLICE GUIDELINES ON CANNABIS

Users to be arrested and charged if found in possession three times

Children under 18 no longer be automatically arrested

Officers should consider escorting them home

Children under 10 should be referred to child protection authorities

We were still extremely troubled. He wouldn't tell us where he was staying and didn't want us to bring him back from Scotland. He was adamant. Eventually he registered himself as homeless, and was put in emergency accommodation.

How did it ever come to this? We couldn't understand why a university undergraduate with three A-levels and 10 GCSEs, and a loving family would do such a thing.

The mental illness sparked by cannabis had produced such anxiety and paranoia in James, he was desperate to get away from the bad memories of his home town, and wanted to start a new life.

He is searching for peace of mind, to be able to put the nightmare behind him, and begin again. If only it was that easy.

There are positives. My son is doing some work. He has managed to get himself a flat. He is not smoking cannabis, he hasn't done so for almost six years. He runs his own life, and is no longer spending money like water.

Constant worry

He doesn't smoke cigarettes, and hardly drinks. He has only been in hospital once - very briefly - in the last year. He seems to be regaining his sense of humour. And crucially the Scottish social and mental health services seem to be doing a good job looking after him.

It is as though we are wading waist-high through a dark cold fast-flowing river

But there are negatives. He lives in a rough area, and we worry that one day we might get a phone call to say he has been mugged or worse. He is still not capable of holding down a full-time job. He doesn't want to come home, and didn't even return for Christmas.

We fear he might never want to come back because of the horrible memories of when he fell ill. He could also get very isolated in a tough Glasgow estate. And we worry when we don't hear from him.

The impact on my family has been great. Even though James was difficult at home, my wife finds it very hard to cope with him living over 400 miles away. She fears that he could be neglecting himself, and will get lonely. The pressure on her is enormous.

There is also the huge effect this has had on my daughter. Even though she is well-balanced, highly-successful and runs her own business, she has had to go to counselling to try to cope. She was always close to her brother; loves and misses him, and it breaks her heart to see them both drifting apart.

James's grandparents are also worried sick about him.

Worse than heroin?

For me, it is as though we are wading waist-high through a dark cold fast-flowing river. We are plodding on, but I dread the time when one of us loses their footing and gets swept away in the current.

My son's illness has brought me in close contact with the mental health system, and it's clear to me that cannabis is now the major cause or spark for serious mental illness in this country.

"The wards of our mental hospitals are bursting with young people admitted after abusing cannabis," one hospital

manager told me.

Fortunately only a minority of cannabis users fall seriously ill. But if people smoke a lot of the drug, and they start smoking at a very early age, then the risk will be far greater. Although it doesn't have the mortality rate of heroin - there isn't the problem with overdoses and dirty needles - it is still a terrible drug.

One doctor said she is often relieved when patients come in with problems caused by heroin, as it doesn't mess up the brain so much.

My family has found out the hard way that cannabis is not the soft cuddly drug that some people would have us believe. For those that use it, I hope that you live a happy and fulfilled life. But that's not the case for my son, and the tens or hundreds of thousands of people like him.

It messes up people's brains and wrecks lives. But it may be a few years before the government and the police wake up to fact that they are helping create a sweeping epidemic of mental illness among a generation of youngsters.

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