Should cannabis be decriminalised and sold by the government?

A recent academic report suggests that the harm caused by arresting people for using cannabis exceeds any other harm that it causes. They propose revoking existing laws so it can be sold legally, permitting state sale of 'safe', low-potency marijuana cigarettes. This idea will be put forward at a UN meeting on drugs in March.

It's fair to say that cannabis is not as physically dangerous as many other recreational drugs. In fact, the likelihood of a lethal marijuana overdose is virtually nil. The current law enforcement approaches to its personal use are too extreme. By the time you read this, cannabis is likely to have been upgraded from a class C to a class B drug in the UK, so the police will not be as lenient with those caught in possession as they once were.

Although, as the report states, marijuana use is associated with increased risk of psychosis and there's also the possibility of adverse reactions to the high-potency pot that now comprises 80 per cent of the market. The data gets stronger all the time: at least five studies on adolescents over time found that the incidence of schizophrenia was related not just to whether they smoked it or not, but to how much they smoked.

But the idea that users will buy government-issue cannabis because it is safer than high-potency, illegal versions is ludicrous. We've tried something similar with 'safe' low-tar and low-nicotine cigarettes already. People thought they were using an inferior product and switched back. Furthermore, the government could not really guarantee its cannabis would be safe. The risks may well depend on the user's age and their genetic makeup, as recent studies have shown.

A fundamental question here is whether law enforcement problems trump all other issues related to cannabis use. As well as increasing the risk of psychosis, we know that marijuana users have significant deficits in memory and judgment. Why? Because it can take days to eliminate all of marijuana's psychoactive compounds like tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Smoke it daily and eventually enough THC builds up to impair your thinking. The effects are most profound in teenagers – they are more cognitively impaired than adults and more likely to become dependent.

Again the report acknowledges the increased effect on teenagers but, perhaps most worryingly, there are questions about cannabis that science has not answered yet. One significant concern is whether marijuana use in early teenage years actually changes the brain. Does this 'rewiring' lead to increased risk of using other drugs and developing serious mental illness? Epidemiologic studies are following populations that have used cannabis heavily during the teenage years and the data is just starting to come out. Until we can answer questions like this, it is logical to maintain some barriers to easy use.

Selling cannabis in government-run stores will not achieve the control that's still needed. So how do we keep otherwise law-abiding citizens out of jail while at the same time creating barriers that reflect the proven harms of heavy marijuana use? I like the Dutch idea of 'heavily regulated toleration'. That means reducing the penalties for personal use, but severe punishments for trafficking, as well as using effective science-based education rather than scare tactics. This approach should help keep productive, upright people out of jail as well as limiting the harm cannabis can cause.

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Cannabis: is there a strong enough case for decriminalising it despite its psychotropic characteristics?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?
Would you support heavily regulated toleration?
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