

Global Cannabis Commission: "There Is No Justification for Incarcerating an Individual for Cannabis Possession"

"If something is not legal, you can't regulate it very effectively."

-- Prof. Robin Room, School of Population Health, University of Melbourne

On October 2, the Global Cannabis Commission, a group of top scientists commissioned by the Beckley Foundation [<http://www.beckleyfoundation.org/index.html>], a British think tank, issued its groundbreaking report, "Cannabis Policy: Moving Beyond Stalemate," at a seminar in the Moses Room of the House of Lords in the Palace of Westminster.

The full report is available online

[http://www.beckleyfoundation.org/pdf/BF_Cannabis_Commission_Report.pdf]. What follows is a summary of its key conclusions, as well as some of the remarks of the authors and other top scientists who were present.

The report was written by five leading marijuana and drug policy researchers: Benedikt Fischer of Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, Peter Reuter of the University of Maryland, and three Australians: Wayne Hall of the University of Queensland, Simon Lenton of the National Drug Research Institute at the Curtin University of Technology, and Robin Room of the University of Melbourne. Joining in the discussion (and contributing advice and research to the report) were a number of other important researchers, including two members of the British government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs [<http://drugs.homeoffice.gov.uk/drugs-laws/acmd/>]: David Nutt, incoming chair of the ACMD and professor of psychopharmacology at Bristol University, and Leslie Iversen, professor of pharmacology at Oxford University and author of the excellent book, *The Science of Marijuana* [<http://blog.mpp.org/?p=88>].

In 174 pages of heavily referenced text, these distinguished researchers lay out what's known about marijuana's physical and psychological risks and -- something most other commission reports have not done -- what is known about the effects of various types of marijuana policies and reforms thereof. This is a hard-nosed look that in certain respects will make marijuana enthusiasts unhappy, as it does not by any means say that marijuana is harmless. Indeed, one could argue the authors were a bit too generous in its consideration of claims that marijuana causes cancer or is a "gateway" to hard drug abuse. But the bottom line is a thoughtful and serious document and a significant addition to the debate over marijuana policy.

RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH MARIJUANA USE:

Motor Vehicle Accidents: "A convergence of fallible evidence suggests that cannabis use increases the risk of motor vehicle rashes 2-3 times," the report states -- a risk that, while not insignificant, "is far more modest than that of alcohol," which can increase one's risk of crashing from six to 15 times.

Respiratory Risks: There is clearly an increased risk of bronchitis among heavy marijuana smokers, but no evidence of increased risk of emphysema. The evidence regarding lung cancer is mixed, the report states, but it oddly fails to cite a key UCLA study [<http://cebp.aacrjournals.org/cgi/content/abstract/15/10/1829>] that found a nonsignificant but consistent trend toward lower lung cancer rates among marijuana users as compared with nonusers. Vaporization, which may be a solution to this problem, gets only brief (albeit encouraging) mention.

Mental Illness: A number of studies have found that rates of psychosis are higher among marijuana users, but the issue of causation remains unsettled. Marijuana almost certainly exacerbates symptoms of schizophrenia in vulnerable individuals, but epidemiologic evidence argues against it causing psychosis in healthy people. The lack of any evidence of increased rates of psychosis following large increases in marijuana use, Iversen noted, "convinced [the ACMD] that cause and effect has not been proven."

The Impact of Increased Potency: Some claims in this regard have been wildly exaggerated, but more research is needed. If, as seems likely, most users adjust their intake in relation to potency (just as drinkers consume smaller amounts of whiskey than of beer), dangers are minimal. One possible concern is that sinsemilla can have high levels of THC but very little CBD, which may moderate some of THC's more problematic effects. Perhaps most important, "All of these trends [toward increased potency] have been encouraged by prohibition, which favors the production of more concentrated forms."

Comparison With Other Drugs: One of the most interesting pieces of the report is an extensive compilation of studies that have compared the physical and psychological harms of marijuana with those of other legal and illegal drugs. With amazing consistency, these evaluations have found marijuana less harmful to health than tobacco and alcohol. The risks of marijuana use, the report states, are "modest" compared with those of these legal drugs or of illegal substances such as amphetamines and cocaine.

POLICY AND REFORM:

Criminalization: While causing obvious harm to those arrested and convicted, criminalization of marijuana possession or use has clearly not succeeded in its aims. Benedikt Fischer noted, "Criminalization regimes in many western countries have not prevented cannabis from being very widely accessible."

Decriminalization: The commission examined in great detail reforms implemented in the U.S., Australia, Britain, and elsewhere which either "decriminalized" marijuana (replacing arrests and criminal penalties with civil sanctions such as fines or warnings) or "depenalized" it (maintaining marijuana possession as a criminal offense, but with reduced penalties that do not include jail). Almost universally, these changes have not been found to increase rates of use, but have been shown to reduce the harms caused by prohibition, including damage to careers, families, etc. Iversen noted that when Britain

made possession a "non-arrestable" offense in 2004, an ongoing trend of declining use rates continued, with "not even a blip" of an increase. "If a nation chooses to use the criminal law for controlling cannabis use, there is no justification for incarcerating an individual for a cannabis possession or use offense, nor for creating a criminal conviction," the report concludes.

Legal Regulation: There remains some controversy over whether or not quasi-legalization of marijuana in the Netherlands led to any increase in use, but after three decades, Dutch use rates remain lower than many countries -- including the U.S. -- which have maintained strict prohibition. Perhaps even more important, the commission concluded that "the Dutch system does appear to have successfully separated the market for cannabis from other substances," discouraging use and availability of hard drugs.

Rather than recommending a specific policy direction, the report lays out a number of alternatives, some of which (such as decriminalization or depenalization) clearly stay within the bounds of current international treaties, and some of which may not. While stopping short of endorsing legal regulation as the only acceptable alternative, the commission clearly found significant advantages in such a system, under which producers and sellers would be licensed, availability to youth would be legally restricted, and quality and potency would be monitored and controlled.

As report co-author Prof. Robin Room noted succinctly, "If something is not legal, you can't regulate it very effectively."

Bruce Mirken, MPP director of communications, attended the October 2 Global Cannabis Commission seminar in London and prepared this summary of the commission's report.