

Weed and Health – Are We Making a Hash of It?

by Aaron Elbel

Weed. Hash. Pot. Grass. Ganja. Sativex. What? Alright, so maybe the last one there seems a little out of place, but like the others in that list it is a derivative of the cannabis plant. However, unlike the others, it has been approved for use by the Irish Medicines Board, and it has become a major crux in the debate on drugs here in Ireland.

Sativex, an oral spray which is used to treat spasticity in multiple sclerosis sufferers, cancer pain and neuropathic pain, is in use in countries such as the UK, Canada, Spain and Germany, and Northern Ireland, among others. However, although it has met with approval from both the IMB and organizations such as MS Ireland, under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1997, cannabinoids such as this are not available in this country.

“As for cannabis, this is the only drug which gets rid of 90% of the symptoms for a short period of time.” This is the testament of Brian (not real name), a multiple sclerosis sufferer who’s personal experiences were included as part of an MS Ireland submission made to the government lobbying for Sativex to be made available here. Brian began buying and smoking cannabis in order to alleviate his symptoms. While it is understandably difficult to prove, there is anecdotal evidence that cannabis usage takes place among the 8000 or so MS sufferers in Ireland as a means of self-medicating. “I like to tell people who ask me why I use cannabis that it makes me feel normal. If only for an hour or so I feel normal for that hour. I don’t feel like my body is electric and twitching” said Brian.

Europe-wide, it is reported that between 10 and 30 percent of MS sufferers self medicate with cannabis. However, this can be extremely dangerous. A 2011 report from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime points out that there is a major difference between scientifically approved, legitimate cannabis-based medications and illegal street-bought product which lacks quality control and may contain harmful contaminants, such as pesticides, chemicals and bacteria.

While it would seem that Sativex is far better than this alternative, some are not so sure. Dr Chris Luke of Cork University Hospital believes that there can be a serious risk of developing psychotic illnesses from the ingestion of any cannabis product and, as set out in their 2010 policy handbook, the Irish Medical Organization urges the government to recognize the links between cannabis and the development of psychosis.

We must also question what effect the legalization of cannabinoid based medical drugs will have on the perception of cannabis itself in this country. Part of the problem around legalizing Sativex is that by doing so the government will be open to accusations that they are softening their stance on cannabis and other illegal drugs.

While I agree that the drug can vastly improve the quality of life of a suffering patient, I worry that by legalizing it we risk normalizing cannabis and increasing it’s perception as a ‘safe’ and ‘medically approved’ drug. A 2012 investigation by Cerdá et al published in the journal of Drug and Alcohol Dependence suggests that the level of marijuana use rose in us states that legalized medical marijuana.

Could something similar happen here? Worryingly, a review by the National Advisory Committee on drugs has shown that there has been an increase in the number of adults using cannabis at some point in their lives from 17% to 22% between 2003 and 2007, and that cannabis has become the most commonly used illegal drug in Ireland. As in the US, increased legal usage of cannabis products could increase illegal usage and inflate the Irish figures even further.

Bear in mind the first six words I wrote. Most people know the first five, but it is the last that is most important. The other words are known, quantifiable, and opinions on them are firmly entrenched. However, a strong public opinion has yet to form on Sativex, and it is public opinion that will make or break the drug – whether it is perceived as a means to ease pain or an easy high, whether it is seen as a mature decision to add to our medical knowledge or the acquiescence to the demands of a reckless few, whether it furthers our knowledge of illegal drugs or simply adds to the confusion. Only time will tell.

References

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