Cannabis Use and Dependence
Public Health and Public Policy

The use of cannabis in the late twentieth and this century is an area of medical and moral controversy. Despite its illegality, cannabis is the most widely used drug after alcohol and tobacco among young adults in Australia, the USA and Europe. This book explores the relationship between health policy, public health and the law regarding cannabis use. It assesses the impact of illegality in drug use and relates this to contemporary policy analysis in Australia, the UK, the US and other developed societies. It evaluates current debates about 'safe use' and 'harm minimisation' approaches, as well as examining the experiences of different prevention, treatment and education policies. Written by two leading drug advisers *Cannabis Use and Dependence* makes a valuable addition to this important field of research.

Wayne Hall is Director of the Office of Public Policy and Ethics at the Institute for Molecular Bioscience, University of Queensland, Australia. He has been an adviser to the World Health Organisation and is a current member of their Expert Advisory Panel on Drug Dependence and Alcohol Problems.

Rosalie Liccardo Pacula is an Economist with the RAND Corporation and a Research Fellow with the United States National Bureau of Economic Research. She has published extensively on drug consumption and policy and is a leading adviser in her field.

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Wayne Hall
University of Queensland

Rosalie Liccardo Pacula
RAND Corporation, California

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To our families:

Pat, Tess and David Hall
and
Joe, Gabriella and Brian Pacula

Contents

List of figures

List of tables

Foreword

Cannabis is the cutting-edge drug for those interested in drug policy reform, the only drug in the Western world for which legal change is a serious possibility. Indeed, changes are already occurring. The German High Court in 1992 declared that a state which allowed alcohol could hardly criminalise the possession of cannabis; the German states have enacted various forms of decriminalisation. Belgium, hardly known as a bastion of drug reform, expanded the frontier of choices by legalising the *use* of the drug in private in March 2003. The Swiss government is in the midst of a long process that may result in full legalisation. The medical marijuana movement in the various American states represents, in part at least, a reaction against the harshness of policy toward recreational use of the drug.

The basis for assessing the desirability of these policy and legal changes is weak. The research base on the health and behavioural effects, let alone the consequences of prohibition is slight. For example, there are no studies of the long-term health effects of cannabis use in the general population, itself a remarkable fact, given the number of health studies that have examined far rarer behaviours. Nor can one more than very roughly assess how much marijuana affects automobile accidents and fatalities.

The stepping stone hypothesis, the belief that marijuana use increases the likelihood that a young person will go on to use of more dangerous drugs, is central to the policy debate. Given the simple facts, that those who use marijuana regularly are much more likely to subsequently use cocaine and heroin, the hawks emphasise this with sincerity and passion. Reformers rest their case on methodologically subtle attacks on the interpretation of these facts and produce models which show that the same patterns of use could be accounted for by factors other than the drug itself. Neither side can be said to have made its case strongly. That does not prevent advocates from expressing great certainty. The reformers' claim that there are no harms is simply wrong. Similarly, the drug warriors' claims as to the severity and breadth of its harms are hugely exaggerated. Indeed, the official US government trumpeting of

every finding of adverse effects, often from small-scale and weak studies with conflicting outcomes, would verge on scandal if we were not inured to it.

Wayne Hall and Rosalie Pacula have written the first honest book on cannabis addressing the whole range of issues that need to be considered for a sensible policy discussion. Honesty seems like a modest plaudit for scholars but it is surprisingly rare in the area of drug policy generally. Moreover they bring to the topic established records of research on marijuana policy-related issues. Hall is a psychologist and Pacula an economist, a good combination for this task since it involves both behavioural and policy issues.

Of particular interest is their discussion of the effect of the removal of criminal penalties for possession, the middle ground for which most reform politicians reach. I, like most other scholars, have accepted at face value the research findings of a generation ago that depenalisation of marijuana in twelve American states had no effect on the prevalence of youthful marijuana use. Hall and Pacula report recent analyses that suggest there is less to this finding than meets the eye. States that depenalised did not necessarily create penalty regimes that were in fact much less punitive than those in some of the other states. For example, New York State, which removed criminal penalties for possession, retained them for actual use. Large numbers of New Yorkers pass through the criminal justice system, at least briefly, for use; to the young, depenalisation may seem like a fine point. Laws may simply not be very relevant when arrest is so rare and punishment so slight. The fact that the highest cannabis use rates in Europe are not in the Netherlands, where the drug has been de facto legalised, but in fully criminalised Britain adds to the unease that these kinds of changes are principal drivers.

Hall and Pacula's analysis is, so to speak, sobering. Cannabis is a source of pleasure to many persons but it poses a variety of risks to users and to society. Policy debates give little weight to the pleasures, reflecting the heavy use by the young and consequently concerns about long-term developmental effects. In that sense the discussion is similar to that about the legal drinking age, in which youthful pleasures from drink are also firmly disregarded. The policy argument is centred on whether marijuana prohibition, with its attendant costs and inevitable inequities, produces enough reductions in youthful cannabis use and related harms. There is no alternative to sorting through the mass of evidence. Hall and Pacula have done that and policy-makers and the public will have to decide how to deal honestly with the uncertainties that they produce.

Peter Reuter
School of Public Affairs and Department of Criminology
University of Maryland

Acknowledgements

Wayne Hall

This book has had a ten-year gestation. It began life as a review of the health and psychological effects of cannabis use that I was commissioned to write in May 1992 by the Australian National Task Force on Cannabis (Hall, Solowij and Lemon, 1994). Parts of this review were updated for a 1997 report on the health implications of cannabis by the World Health Organisation and for a series of papers on specific aspects of the health effects of cannabis.

My work on this topic has been funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing as part of the core funding of the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (between 1992 and 2001), specific grants from the Commonwealth Department of Health (1993 and 2001), and by funding for the Office of Public Policy and Ethics, Institute for Molecular Bioscience, University of Queensland (2002–2003).

Peter Reuter is owed special thanks for encouraging me to write a book that addressed both the health effects of cannabis and the effects of cannabis control policies. He also suggested the collaboration with Rosalie Pacula when my enthusiasm for finishing the book was at its lowest point after taking up my current new appointment at the University of Queensland in September 2001.

I would like to thank the following colleagues at the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) who contributed to my work on cannabis that is summarised in this book:

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Earlier versions of the many chapters have been previously published. Chapter 1 includes material originally prepared for the WHO on assessing the health and psychological effects of cannabis. Chapters 2–12 are extensively updated and revised versions of chapters in Hall, Solowij and Lemon (1994) and Hall, Degenhardt and Lynskey (2001). Chapter 7 on cannabis dependence benefited from the doctoral work of Wendy Swift. Chapter 8 on the cognitive effects of chronic cannabis use is indebted to Nadia Solowij's doctoral work which was published as Solowij (1998). Chapter 11 has been based on work done in collaboration with Michael Lynskey on the educational consequences of adolescent cannabis use. Chapter 13 is based in part upon literature reviewed by Louisa Degenhardt for her doctoral thesis. Chapter 19 develops arguments first expressed in the 1999 Okey Lecture (Hall, 2001).

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