

Cover Story



‘Masking’ the unmasked

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Cannabis, commonly known as Ganja, is an addictive substance with strong evidence for many of its adverse effects on health (1). It is an illegal substance in the world other than in Uruguay, Canada and a few states in the USA. However, a striking global campaign for legalising cannabis is in operation at present to convince governments and other stakeholders that it should be legal, available and accessible to people, based on the argument that it is ‘less harmful’ than other illegal drugs and tobacco. This well-funded ‘Legalise Cannabis Campaign’, backed by known vectors of ill health like multi-national tobacco and fizzy drink industries, is accused of propagating myths, distorted facts and half-truths to convince policy makers to achieve its goals (2). As public health professionals and powerful stakeholders in public health policy processes, do we possess an updated knowledge on cannabis and its impacts? Can we identify myths from facts related to cannabis?

This issue’s cover is on an image adapted from the ‘Annual Short Drama Competition’ organized by Alcohol and Drug Information Centre (ADIC) in collaboration with the National Youth Services Council (NYSC) under the theme, Innovative Approaches on Alcohol and Tobacco Prevention for Youth. The colourful mask concealing the well-known dangers of cannabis as portrayed in the image, is creating confusion and doubt related to the science on its harm, hence the theme of cover story, ‘masking’ the unmasked.



The facts on adverse effects of cannabis remain the same and uncontested. Even today, it remains true that it can induce tachycardia and hypertension, and even cause sudden death by doing so (3). It remains true that smoking cannabis will give all the adverse effects related to smoking tobacco, simply because it is not the leaf in the cigarette per se that causes the effects, but inhalation and dissemination of a diverse range of toxins via the two efficient organ systems highly adapted to inhale and disseminate oxygen to sustain life in the human body (1, 3-4). It remains true that it has the potential to cause psychosis, especially among young users, increasing their risk of schizophrenia. It remains true that cannabis not only increases the risk for mental disorders but also affects higher cognitive functions including memory, learning capacity and productivity potential of young users (1). There are other intriguing facts about cannabis that are not highlighted by the “Legalise Cannabis” campaign.

It is a fact that Cannabis in the market today is genetically modified for a higher shelf-life and higher addiction potential, so that the industry can be more profitable. Cannabis found in the market had recorded tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) levels even as high as 35%, compared to the naturally occurring level of less than 2%. Thus, an important fact to be aware of is that cannabis in the market today is quite different from what had been prescribed by the traditional medical practitioners or what was smoked in 1970's within the 'hippie' culture (5). Ironically, the few states in USA which have legalised cannabis use have started reporting on the serious public health related adverse effects emerging due to increased access and use, brought on by legalisation. The number and proportion of road traffic accidents have increased due to driving under the influence of cannabis and these trends keep on rising. It is proven that cannabis cause impairment of driving skills (6). Child hospital admissions due to accidental as well as non-accidental cannabis poisoning have also been reported due to increased access to this substance at home and school.

As cigarettes are now going 'out-of-fashion', the multi-national tobacco companies are looking for alternatives to stop the habit of smoking from dying, in order to sustain their market share (2). In line, a tobacco industry funded movement to legalise cannabis is evident around the world. This campaign advocates cannabis as a herbal drug to be used in the form of medicine including in Ayurveda practice, and is largely dependent on this revenue. However, what the lobbyists of this campaign 'forget' to mention is that when any natural compound/substance is used as a medicine, it should be done solely for that purpose, prepared in

purified forms, in recommended doses and exclusively for indications relevant in those suffering from specific disease categories. Legalising this highly addictive, psychoactive substance would give it the "license to kill", the same licence that we have given to the tobacco industry years ago, to destroy the lives of millions of users and non-users around the world.

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