

## **Prohibition - it should be banned**

By Lizzie Marvally, NZ Herald, 20 August 2016

Imagine a natural product with medicinal benefits that human beings have used for centuries. A product so popular that its sale has funded the activities of certain enterprises for generations. A product used by people young and old, well and unwell, rich and poor.

One would assume that the tax revenue from this product would be significant. That its popularity would demand responsible regulation to protect both the industry and consumers. That its widely reported pain-relieving qualities would be utilised to provide relief to sufferers of chronic pain. That gangs would be the last "businesses" we'd want to be responsible for its sale. It would seem like a no-brainer.

Unless that product is cannabis.

We've been waging war on drug users for close to 20 years, since the UN's General Assembly Special Session on Drug Control in 1998. The goal of that session was to eradicate illicit drug-use by 2008. It was a mission that failed spectacularly.

Despite billions of dollars spent, huge numbers of people are still using illegal substances recreationally and medicinally, drug lords and gangs are still rich and powerful, and addicts are still stigmatised.

Like most prohibitions, banning drugs just doesn't work, and this week it was announced that 64 per cent of New Zealanders surveyed want to see the possession of a small amount of cannabis either decriminalised or legalised.

It's not difficult to see why they feel that way. While our justice system spends millions of taxpayer dollars every year prosecuting and incarcerating people for low-level drug offences, our levels of cannabis usage remain largely consistent.

The burden on our police force is immense. In the six years prior to 2013, approximately half of all drug charges laid by police were for possession of small amounts of cannabis or smoking utensils (such as pipes), and more than 2800 people were imprisoned for minor drug offences. Between 2007 and 2011, we spent \$59 million incarcerating people for low-level drug offences.

Many of those people are under 25. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that sending a young person to prison, an environment the New Zealand Drug Foundation has aptly described as a "University of Crime", for a low-level drug offence is nonsensical. Not only does banning drugs not work, it has led us down a path where we have limited empirical information about drugs like cannabis (a term which encompasses the marijuana plant, hashish and hash oil). As you would imagine, it is difficult to study a drug when it is illegal. In a review of 79 randomised trials studying marijuana use, British researchers found that though there was strong evidence that cannabinoids could be used to relieve chronic pain, support for theories about the drug's ability to reduce nausea and vomiting during chemotherapy was hindered by the limited reliability of the available research.

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We do, however, have case studies provided by the countries that have decriminalised and legalised cannabis. In 2001, Portugal decided to treat possession of minor amounts of all drugs as a health issue rather than a punishable offence.

Drug-related deaths and HIV infections from needle-sharing have reduced significantly since. When the police catch people with small amounts of drugs in Portugal, they are ordered to appear before a so-called "dissuasion panel", consisting of legal, social and psychological professionals. Repeat offenders are prescribed treatment, rather than sent to prison. When Portugal changed its thinking around drug legislation, many observers assumed drug-use rates would soar.

They didn't. In fact, by most measures, drug use in Portugal has fallen over the past 15 years.

Legalising low-level drugs like cannabis would allow the government to regulate the sale of substances like marijuana, set age limits, require growers and sellers to be licensed, and would devastate the black market that has prospered under our current legislation. How great would it be if we could cut off a major source of income for gangs here in New Zealand?

It would allow us to commission high-quality research on the drug, its medicinal benefits and identify those for whom it could prove harmful. It would allow us to develop well-informed health programmes to assist addicts, education programmes for young people, and provide patients with chronic or terminal illnesses with a natural medicine to manage their pain. It would also make it significantly less "cool" among teenagers.

Until recently, I was completely against legalising, or even decriminalising cannabis. I'm one of the few people I know who has never used the drug and I had been influenced by the culture of fear fostered by the war on drugs. The deeper I delve into the issue, however, the more I am struck by how frightening the consequences of prohibition are.

Which is more harmful - a system that criminalises young people, burdens our police and judiciary, thwarts research, stigmatises addicts, funds gangs, and has no quality control, or a system that allows us to regulate cannabis like its close (legal) cousin, alcohol? It's a question worth pondering.