

Marijuana as medicine

by Yee Jee Tso

The history of marijuana is as extensive as the history of the human race. It is the most widely used psychedelic drug known to man, and the various uses of the hemp plant are literally woven into the fabric of our past.

Archaeological evidence from an ancient village in Taiwan suggests that man had utilized parts of the marijuana plant as early as the stone age, 10,000 years ago. Marijuana use in ancient India is documented in a collection of holy books, the Vedas. Ancient Chinese used hemp fabric as the mainstay of their material for clothing. They also used a mixture of hemp fibres and mulberry tree bark to invent paper, a technology later exported through the Arabs to Europe. The ancient history of mankind was thus written on a marijuana product.

Marijuana has also endured the extreme polarities of public opinion. It was once the centre of a staple industry, praised in 19th century poetry and literature. In the 1930's, marijuana was entangled with opiates and other narcotic drug abuses, which led to its prohibition. Later, it was denounced as a virulent danger to society and gross exaggerations of marijuana's effects led to inappropriately harsh penalties during the 1950s.

Since then, public opinion, judicial protocol, and even legislation have yo-yoed from lenient to intolerant and back again with chaotic resonance. The marijuana issue has been a political stomping ground, resulting in billions of dollars in enforcement costs, billions in legal costs, and millions of lives being affected. An enormous amount of documentation is available on the subject, and ironically most of it is on paper.

But the relevant issue at hand is how to use, develop and legislate Marijuana wisely as a medicine. Within the last few months, our approach to the "pot" dilemma has reached a new era due to an initiative taken by the Government of Canada in response to the efforts of one persistent Canadian.

A report in *The Globe and Mail* on July 31, 2000, stated that "Terrance Parker, a 44-year-old epileptic...won a 23-year

court battle for the right to smoke [marijuana] to control his seizures." The Ontario Court of Appeal ruled the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act invalid, as it "...deprived Parker of his right to security of the person and his right to liberty..." as guaranteed by the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. This ruling effectively forced the government to completely overhaul regulations pertaining to the drug, to allow for its possession and production for medical purposes.

The new regulations, which came into force on July 30, 2001, address marijuana's medical value in the relief of symptoms associated with: multiple sclerosis (MS), spinal cord injury and disease, cancer, AIDS/HIV infection, severe arthritis, and epilepsy. Symptoms that have been treated successfully with marijuana include: severe pain, muscle spasms, cachexia, severe nausea, and seizures.

The drug Marinol is a synthetic form of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), the main active cannabinoid in marijuana. It was launched by Roxane Laboratories in 1987 and approved by the US FDA to treat nausea in cancer patients and appetite loss in AIDS patients. In Canada, it has been approved for treatment of severe nausea due to cancer chemotherapy.

However, THC is only one of more than 400 cannabinoids and cannabidiols in smoked marijuana that work to control seizures and muscle spasms. Marinol is therefore often not an effective alternative for sufferers of epilepsy and MS. With the new regulations in place, Canadians now have the benefit of smoking marijuana as a complementary treatment for these crippling ailments.

Information on the new regulations and the application process to use medical marijuana is available on the Health Canada website www.hc-sc.gc.ca.

References:

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