

MENTAL HEALTH

PLAYING WITH THE MIND

Should Australia follow Canada and 11 US states to legalise recreational cannabis? Supporters say it would cut crime and help control the drug, but critics say the risks for young brains is too high

WORDS SARAH HENDER

He walks into the café in a business suit, well-groomed and smiling. He looks about 30. This is not the appearance of a man that has spent nearly a decade unemployed, a daily user of cannabis for nearly half his life. This is a man who has pulled himself back from the brink.

Adam was a good student with a close group of friends when, at 15, his older brother introduced him to the drug. By 18, in his first year of university, cannabis was a daily habit, helping him to relax at night. Before long, he'd suffer cravings if he didn't have it.

At its height, he would smoke 20-30 bonges (water pipes) a day – a lot of mind-altering impact from the active ingredient, delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol (THC). Unmotivated, he dropped out of university for a job at Subway. He would never go back.

Adam, of Norwood, had always been sociable. With the drug, he preferred to stay home and smoke. Soon friends stopped inviting him out. Crowds became a source of fear, and he began to suffer panic attacks at the thought of being near any, even to watch his team, Adelaide United, play. Then, when Adam began taking ecstasy, he started missing shifts at Subway, and lost his job.

Professor Michael Baigent of Flinders University, psychiatrist and addiction medicine specialist, has heard many stories like Adam's. He knows what can happen when adolescents become reliant on cannabis.

"The more entrenched it is in their social network, the less engaging opportunities they have, the more likely it is they will become dependent on it," he says. "The trajectory for these young people is much more concerning as they are then likely to continue their drug use, and this can lead to trying other drugs."

Australians are among the highest users of cannabis in the world, with about 10 per cent of people using it regularly and about 4 per cent of 15-19 year olds using it weekly. And, as the drug becomes increasingly legalised overseas, calls are likely to grow for a similar approach here. Canada has legalised the drug, arguing it will keep drug

profits out of criminal hands, and so have 11 American states.

The question is, does that approach create as many problems as it solves?

Adam's experiences were not unusual for a long-term frequent cannabis user. Drug dependence, lack of motivation, anxiety, panic attacks, depression, and social phobia have all been linked to frequent and heavy cannabis use.

Research has also been building over the past 20 years showing a risk of more serious mental health issues associated with cannabis use and those working in mental health are worried. Recent research has pointed to particular impacts on developing teenage brains.

The overall effects of the drug can include psychotic episodes leading to a later psychotic disorder (losing one's sense of reality) or a type of psychosis, schizophrenia. Researchers are investigating, but it is not yet clear how this association comes about.

Alex Berenson, a former *New York Times* journalist and author of the book *Tell your Children: The Truth about Marijuana, Mental Illness and Violence* is concerned that the relentless march towards legalisation ignores serious health risks.

He argues attitudes in the US have been influenced by the companies responsible for manufacturing medicinal cannabis, deliberately confusing people into believing that it is a medicine rather than an intoxicant.

Confusion has hit Australia too by the recent legalisation of medicinal cannabis (for certain medical conditions) and industrial hemp (seed for food and fibre for clothing).

But as Baigent, psychiatrist and addiction medicine specialist of Flinders University explains, the ingredients are not the same. That part of the cannabis plant used for those products contains very low levels of THC and has none of the mind-altering and potentially damaging effects of the drug found in the flowered part of the cannabis plant, the part that remains illegal for recreational use in Australia.

This belief that cannabis is harmless is probably a throwback from the baby boom-

er generation who are now the parents of those aged 18-25, the ones most likely to try the drug. But as Berenson says (and Baigent agrees), THC levels are higher than before due to the hydroponic processes available now, about 20 per cent up on 20 years ago. He compares the difference to that "between a beer and a martini".

Berenson argues that a review conducted by the 2017 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found that cannabis can cause psychosis and schizophrenia. His critics are outraged by what they say is an exaggeration. Most notably, one of the report's own authors, Ziva Cooper, has criticised Berenson's view for being dangerous and misinformed.

She clarifies that an association between cannabis and psychosis has been found but that there is not enough evidence to show that cannabis is the cause.

Berenson also suggests a link between psychotic conditions and violent crime. He supports his claim by pointing to a sharp increase in crime in the first four US states that have legalised the drug.

One critic, Chicago Lewis, a writer for *Rolling Stone* magazine, suggests this attempt to link the two is like saying that increased availability of organic food leads to autism, considering the increase in both. She claims that it is the illegality of cannabis that is causing the most harm through violent crime associated with its illegal manufacture and sale, and by the lack of regulation in how it is manufactured.

Much about the drug is unknown. Writer Malcolm Gladwell who reviewed Berenson's book in a *New Yorker* article in January this year, notes that although Berenson might have overstated the case, the govern-

mental approach across the US towards liberalising cannabis is surprising when we know so little about it. He compares it to the approach taken towards a new pharmaceutical drug.

"Figuring out the 'dose-response relationship' of a new compound is something a pharmaceutical company does from the start of trials in human subjects ... the amount of active ingredient in a pill and the metabolic path that ingredient takes after it enters your body – these are things that drugmakers will have painstakingly mapped out before the product comes on the market..."

In comparison, Gladwell notes that we are still waiting for this information about cannabis.

On one point, at least, everyone agrees – more research is needed. Where they disagree is whether we should know more about cannabis before we take the jump into the unknown abyss of legalisation.

Matt Noffs, chief executive of the Ted Noffs Foundation in Sydney, says Australia led the way in better controls over tobacco sales, and needs to get ahead on cannabis, since the pressure for legalisation will grow.

"I am not for legalising cannabis without more control," he said recently. "I am for more control and right now. When it comes to cannabis in Australia, we have very little (control)."

Noffs argues that Australia has managed to reduce tobacco use despite it being legal by sale restrictions and plain packaging, so "let's do the same for cannabis," he said in an opinion piece for the ABC.

In South Australia, Baigent – who has treated people with mental health issues and addiction over 30 years – believes we know enough that we should limit the drug's availability. He is comfortable with the way things are currently in this state, namely decriminalised for personal use but a criminal offence to manufacture it.

"I wouldn't like to see it liberalised any more than that because of the clinical harms that I see from its use. Research indicates that where it is more available, there is increased use. It's not an innocuous drug."

Adam is sure of that. After losing his job at Subway, things got steadily worse. He

“Where it is more available, there is increased use. It's not innocuous



would remain unemployed for the next eight years, suffering extreme anxiety which presented in the strangest forms.

Adam had moved into the granny flat on his parents' property, which triggered a need to be house-proud. That turned into an obsession. He spent most of the working day cleaning both his own flat and his parents' entire house. Cleaning dictated what Adam would be able to do for the day. It got to the point where if anyone even opened the door, he would visualise dirt coming in and he'd have to start again. A feeling of utter devastation would overwhelm him if he was unhappy with the job he had done.

The introduction of methamphetamines into his life tipped Adam over the edge. It made all of his bad feelings worse and his cleaning obsession intensified.

"I would get really upset and then tell myself that I had to wipe something four times, then question whether I even did that and do it another four times, a different way. It was a lot of that sort of stuff," he says.

He felt a lot of anger, his skin looked terrible and he lost weight. And then he stopped taking it. No rehab, no detox, just his own resolve.

"I pretty much woke up one day and thought, 'I'm done with this'," he says. "I just thought to myself, 'I'm so sick and tired of this, the horrible feelings that you have, the way it makes you look'."

He continued smoking cannabis for another couple of years and then stopped. He remembers the day. January 26, 2015. Although he had been to detox centres on numerous occasions at the request of his parents, this time he submitted himself to detox at Glenside and never took it up again. He smoked a lot of cigarettes during that time but gave them up too the next year. Why?

"I was jealous," he says. "I was jealous of my friends. They were getting engaged, they were going away on trips. I knew I'd been falling behind for a long time but I was the last one. I had been for a few years."

The combination of Adam's age when he began using cannabis and his daily use made him especially vulnerable for problems.

A 2014 Australian study conducted by the National Drug and Alcohol Research >