

Weighing up the Cannabis Referendum – is the current law working?

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When it comes to cannabis, I think most New Zealanders want more or less the same things.

We don't want young people using cannabis. While the evidence is clear that most people use cannabis without problems, the few that do almost always started young and use heavily.

We want those people that do have drug problems to be helped rather than punished. Currently places in drug treatment services are hard to get, and almost non-existent outside of the main centres.

We don't want to be wasting police time on arresting adults for simply enjoying cannabis. Freedom for adults to make their own decisions is a basic value, as long as they are not harming other people or putting other people at risk.

This September New Zealanders will get to vote on how best to achieve those outcomes. We can stick with how things are now, or move to a regulated market. The regulated model on offer is an improved version of Canada. It has a lot of carefully thought-through details so please do have a look at it (see www.referendums.govt.nz/cannabis/summary.html). Consider both choices, to see which gets us closer to our goals. Have a look at what the independent research tells us about how best to manage cannabis.

When it comes to young people using cannabis, it has been normalised for decades. Cannabis is widespread and easy for young people to get hold of. The Christchurch and Dunedin longitudinal studies at the University of Otago have given us some of the best evidence in the world around cannabis use. Their summary of the research can be found at cannabisreferendum.co.nz. They show that around 80% of New Zealanders have tried cannabis by age 25. While most people use cannabis without harm, a small number do experience problems. These are people who started young and use heavily.

We cannot stop young people using cannabis entirely, just as it is impossible to stop them drinking alcohol. We can make it more difficult for them to get hold of though. Having an age limit helps. In Canada, according to official Government figures,

“... use among Canadian youth has not increased. This accords with the Colorado experience—the first to legalize non-medical cannabis.... (while) use among 15- to 17-year-olds declined (19.8% to 10.4%).” (Statistics Canada)

Being illegal means no controls, no age limit. It brings young people who do try cannabis into contact with a criminal underworld. Regulating the market by making it R20 won't stop young people trying cannabis entirely, but it will make it harder for them to get into a pattern of risky use.

For the small number of people who do end up having problems with cannabis use, we need better drug education and drug treatment services. The economist Shamubeel Eaqub has estimated that we need another \$150 million spent on drug treatment to meet current needs. The potential tax from cannabis sales (estimated at between \$250 million to almost half a billion dollars) has been ring-fenced for drug harm reduction.

Finally, most people do not want to see their friends and neighbours being arrested for simply enjoying cannabis. We still arrest thousands of people a year for cannabis use in NZ, and there are even people in prison for growing their own. That is not usually any of the lawyers, doctors or accountants who enjoy cannabis. They rarely get searched by the police and if they do, get off with a warning. It is most likely to be someone poor and brown, for whom a cannabis conviction and fine can be life-destroying.

Arresting people for cannabis doesn't stop them using it. In fact research shows that people are MORE likely to use it after being charged. The only people who the law inhibits from using cannabis, the only people for whom regular use goes up after legalisation, are the over-65's. Perhaps this is because they now feel ok about trying it as a medicine for those aches and pains. Maybe it is because they have worked hard all their lives and deserve to enjoy a relatively benign recreational drug that makes them laugh.

And who could have a problem with that?