



O CANNABIS!

The highs and lows of legalization

By Allyson Rowley

On July 1, 2018, Canada is due to become the first G7 country to nationally legalize the recreational use of marijuana. We weed through fact and fiction, and try to clear the smoke on the collective experiment we're all about to experience.

Above: Illustrations from *The herball or Generall historie of plantes* by John Gerard, published in London in 1636. From the rare book collection of the William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections at McMaster University.

It's been called gift of the gods, sacred grass, weed from the devil's garden, assassin of youth.

For thousands of years, it's been used for textiles, sails, rope, paper, edible seeds, oils, fuel, crop shelter, and medicinal remedies. Sacred rituals have been created around it, powerful economies built upon it, and equally powerful political movements have tried to eradicate it.

Cannabis is a simple weed with a complicated story. Really, it's just a very useful plant that grows on our green Earth. And somewhere along the way, humans discovered it can also make us high.

Come Canada Day 2018, federal legislation is expected to pass, granting those over the age of 18 the right to possess, share, purchase, and grow small amounts of legal cannabis. How it will be distributed, sold, and policed will be up to the provinces and territories, who can also decide to set a minimum legal age above 18. Canada was the first country to legalize medicinal cannabis (in 2001) and that right will remain in place. Ironically, Canada was also one of the first countries to ban it (in 1923).

"It's a fascinating subject," says drug policy expert Michael DeVillaer. "For all living Canadians, we have never experienced the creation of a new legal drug industry. It's quite novel for all of us." A faculty member in McMaster's Department of Psychiatry and Behavioural Neurosciences as well as the Peter Boris Centre for Addictions Research, DeVillaer has contributed to the development of Ontario's addiction treatment system over the past three decades.

In February 2017, he authored "Cannabis Law Reform in Canada: Pretense & Perils," a 110-page report presented to the federal government. Two years in the making, his report examines the price society has already paid with the tobacco, alcohol, and pharmaceutical industries and their profit-based business models. "We now have an opportunity to try something different to protect public health," says DeVillaer.

He recommends the establishment of a not-for-profit cannabis authority to regulate the new industry. He also advocates for immediate decriminalization for possession of small amounts of cannabis – and he suggests moving more slowly toward legalization. "This could have an enormous influence on Canadian society," he states.

"Should teenagers be using cannabis? My answer is no," says **Christina Grant '94**, a McMaster pediatrician who specializes in adolescent health. However, Grant readily acknowledges the reality: By the time they are 15, one-third of Canadian youth have already experimented with marijuana.

Three years ago, she and Richard Bélanger, a colleague from Université Laval, stepped up to research a position statement for the Canadian Pediatrics Society. "Cannabis and Canada's children and youth" was published last fall and posted online in May 2017.

"Our position wasn't to say yay or nay to legalization. We felt



Exploring the highs and lows of cannabis use... (L. to R.) pediatrician Christina Grant, drug policy expert Michael DeVillaeer and psychiatrist Catharine Munn. "For all living Canadians, we have never experienced the creation of a new legal drug industry," says DeVillaeer. "It's quite novel for all of us."



the horse was already out of the barn," says Grant. Rather, the co-authors wanted to equip pediatricians, parents, and youth with the most up-to-date scientific evidence. Grant explains we now know the brain continues to develop until at least age 25. Not only is cannabis addictive, it can also create significant changes in the young brain that can impact mental health, social skills, attention span, and long-term planning.

Grant also notes that today's marijuana is a lot more potent than the pot smoked in the sixties and seventies. And with the proliferation of edibles like cookies and gummies, young children (and pets) are at serious risk for accidental overdose from these toxic goodies.

Grant and Bélanger recommend keeping the minimum legal age at 18, rather than potentially forcing young people underground. However, their report stresses the need to mitigate the temptations and risks to youth – for example, prohibiting dispensaries from being located near schools.

"When people think of drug abuse, they think of opioids and heroin," says Grant. "But for an adolescent medical specialist in Canada, it's youth with cannabis use disorder that we see, day in, day out."

Catharine Munn '95, '00, '07 also spends her days helping young people deal with any number of health concerns, including

addiction and substance abuse. "I am here for students," says Munn, lead psychiatrist at McMaster's Student Wellness Centre, a comprehensive health care facility.

"There's a perception that marijuana is a harmless drug," she says. While Munn recognizes there are some limited medicinal benefits, she emphasizes it's also "the number one drug that youth enter into in-patient drug treatment programs for."

In March 2017, Munn co-chaired Cannabis on Campus, a public forum that brought together stakeholders, students and researchers. The forum was followed by a paper from the McMaster Health Forum, published online in April. Munn points out that marijuana is prohibited on campus and the University is also in the process of becoming a smoke-free campus.

Munn encourages parents to talk about marijuana with their teens. "Have a conversation, based on evidence."

She acknowledges there are many positives about legalization – notably, there will be more control over the product and young people won't have a criminal record for the rest of their lives.

For the time being, though, "it's a bit of a wild west," says Munn. "There are good things about legalization, but we have to enter this with eyes wide open."



JD HOWELL

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Leading the way in cannabis research

This summer, the Michael G. DeGroote School of Medicine Initiative for Innovation in Healthcare launched the Michael G. DeGroote Centre for Medicinal Cannabis Research. Generously funded by Michael G. DeGroote and the Boris family, the Centre will leverage world-renowned expertise at McMaster University and St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton. The authoritative voice for the clinical understanding of medicinal cannabis, the Centre will use the highest standards of evidence-based research methodology to develop an online portal of research and to advance scientific discovery. The Centre will also create a network of researchers, clinicians, industry professionals and patients to advance the clinical understanding of cannabis -- with a focus on its therapeutic potential for chronic pain as well as any unintended consequences of its use. Go to cmcr.mcmaster.ca for more info.