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Statement on the classification of cannabis and harm reduction measures

19 January 2006

The House will know that last March I asked the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) to examine new evidence on the harmfulness of cannabis and to evaluate whether it altered their assessment of the drug's classification. In so doing, I was particularly concerned by studies published since the Council's 2002 Report which seemed to indicate strong links between cannabis and serious mental illness.

I am grateful to the Council for the work which they have done in responding to my request and I am today placing a copy of their report and conclusions in the Library of the House.

From their Report, I highlight two conclusions:-

The first is that cannabis is harmful and that its use can lead to a wide range of physical and psychological harms and hazards; that the mental health effects of cannabis are real and significant; that cannabis is potentially harmful with short-term risks to physical health; that a substantial research programme into the relationship between cannabis and mental health should be instituted; that the Government ought to seek to reduce the use of cannabis and that the cultivation, supply and possession of cannabis should remain illegal.

The second is that the level of classification is only one amongst the issues to be addressed and that priority needs to be given to proper enforcement of the law, to education and to campaigning against the use of cannabis.

The Council recommends a substantial Government education campaign, strengthened medical services for those dependent on cannabis and greater protection for those with pre-existing mental conditions that place them at particular risk from cannabis use. The Council also proposes further research to improve our understanding of the mental health implications of cannabis use.

I have discussed these recommendations with my colleagues the Secretaries of State for Education and Health and we have agreed to accept and implement them energetically.

In so doing we accept that the use of cannabis significantly increases the chances of developing chronic bronchitis and poses a potential lung cancer risk. We accept the growing body of research which suggests that cannabis may exacerbate or even trigger a range of serious mental health problems including schizophrenia. In the words of the ACMD report, "the mental health effects of cannabis are real and significant".

In summary cannabis is anything but harmless.

That is why possession of cannabis remains punishable by up to 2 years in prison. It is why the Government strongly opposes proposals to legalise the drug and will continue to do so. This month we have introduced new powers under the 2005 Drugs Act to strengthen the hand of the police in dealing with those caught supplying the drug.

But, as the Advisory Council's Report indicates, the illegal status of the drug is not enough. We need a massive programme of public education to convey the danger of cannabis use. Our aim is to provide effective education in school about the risks posed by cannabis, to send the right messages about the harms the drug does and to equip young people with the knowledge and courage to make the right decisions. We will use the FRANK media campaign and other channels to raise understanding about the dangerous and illegal impact of cannabis consumption. The campaign, delivered in partnership with the police, will publicise the penalties for cannabis dealing, production and use.

Growing and selling cannabis is not harmless or idealistic. It is a multi-million pound business, often organised by sophisticated and violent criminals. I remind the House that those who deal in large quantities of cannabis face maximum penalties of up to 14 years for this offence.

That is why I have discussed with ACPO the need to focus police effort and to take strong action to reduce the supply of cannabis. The police and I agree that in recent years the production and major dealing of cannabis have not always been targeted sufficiently vigorously and we have agreed that this needs to change.

ACPO will now draw up a consolidated campaign of action to attack the production and trafficking of cannabis which provides obscene profits out of the misery of users. ACPO will aim to put cannabis farms out of business and major dealers behind bars. At the same time it will revise and strengthen its guidelines for dealing with cannabis-related crime.

As members will be aware the Home Office recently published a consultation exercise to look at threshold levels of cannabis in a person's possession which would deem them to be a supplier. I would like to inform the House that my final decision will be at a considerably lower threshold than the 500g suggested in the current consultation.

I believe that these education, health and police measures give clear and comprehensive messages about the dangers of cannabis and a warning that those who produce or are major dealers in cannabis will be brought to justice. They are focused upon reducing the use of cannabis and I believe that reduction of use should be the goal of all our drugs policies, whether the drug is legal or illegal.

And it is the case that clarity is the best weapon we have in the fight to reduce the use of cannabis. That is the basis upon which I approach the issue of classification.

The more that I have considered these matters the more concerned I have become about the limitations of our current system. Decisions on classification often address different or conflicting purposes and too often send strong but confused signals to users and others about the harms and consequences of using a particular drug and there is often disagreement over the meaning of different classifications. For example many people wrongly interpreted the reclassification of cannabis to mean that cannabis was not harmful and that its use was acceptable and even legal.

For these reasons I will in the next few weeks publish a consultation paper with suggestions for a review of the drug classification system, on the basis of which I will in due course make proposals.

On the particular issues in front of us now:

As previously announced, I have accepted the advice to keep Methyl Amphetamine as a class B drug, though this is subject to a review reporting later this year. Similarly I have accepted the Council's advice not to classify Khat as a controlled drug. I can today announce that I have also asked the Advisory Council to report on the classification of so called date rape drugs, including GHB and Rohypnol.

On cannabis, I have considered very carefully the advice which I have received from many sources. I am influenced by data on levels of use of the drug and evidence that cannabis use has fallen among 16-24 year olds from 28% in 1998 to less than 24% last year. The preliminary assessment is that, contrary to my personal expectation, reclassification has not led to an increase in use. Moreover I accept

the view of the Advisory Council that further research on the mental health implications is needed before any decision to reclassify is made.

Whilst I shall keep this matter under close review in light of the factors which I have mentioned, I have decided to accept the Advisory Council's recommendation, which is supported by the police and by most drugs and mental health charities to keep the current classification of cannabis.

Everyone needs to understand that cannabis is harmful and it is illegal. Our education and health campaigns will clearly transmit that message. Police operations will target the producers and major dealers so that consumption of cannabis will be significantly reduced.

I hope that the government will have the support of the whole House in seeking that outcome.

END

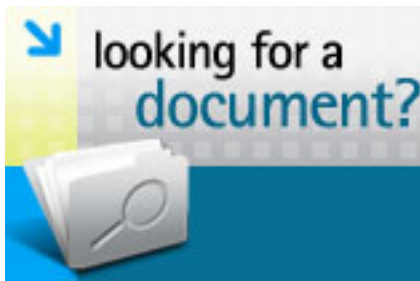
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