

CANNABIS: Devastating official figures reveal true toll on nation's mental health

EXCLUSIVE

125,000 hospital admissions caused by drug in just five years. So much for all the propaganda that it's harmless

By Stephen Adams and Sanchez Manning

THE devastating effect of cannabis on Britain's mental health can be revealed for the first time today.

As campaigners call for the drug's legalisation, shocking figures obtained by The Mail on Sunday show that it has caused more than 125,000 hospital admissions in the last five years.

And around 15,000 of those cases involved teenagers – some of whom were rushed to A&E departments suffering serious psychosis.

Analysis carried out by NHS officials for this paper has also revealed how children below the age of ten have been admitted to hospital after taking the powerful and addictive substance. Some people hooked on the drug have taken their own lives after suffering hallucinations and many more are now unable to lead normal lives, according to doctors.

The number of cannabis-related hospitalisations per year in England has leapt by more than 50 per cent since 2013 – from 19,765 to 31,130.

The dramatic rise has coincided with an increasingly liberal approach to policing the Class B drug in many parts of the country. In Durham, police now turn a blind eye to possession – and even small-scale

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cultivation. Last week, the Royal College of Psychiatrists announced it was setting up a panel to consider backing legalisation of cannabis – arguing that could be a way to control its increasing strength.

But evidence from the US, where nine states have legalised recreational use, shows that is not happening. In Colorado and Washington State, for example, the average strength of the drug is going up. And since it was legalised in Colorado in 2014, cannabis-related trips to emergency rooms by teenagers have quadrupled, according to an academic report.

Evidence is also building that regularly smoking cannabis during teenage years can affect brain development – shrinking the hippocampus, essential for memory and regulating emotions.

Last night, Tory MP Craig Mackinlay said the figures were a stark wake-up call to those considering legalisation. 'Far too few people are aware of the severe mental health problems cannabis can cause, particularly on younger, developing brains,' he said. 'Caving in to populist demands to legalise a harmful drug is not the way to deal with preventing its normalisation and use.'

Around 2.4 million people in Britain smoke cannabis, including a million 16- to 24-year-olds. While rates are little changed over the last decade, there are signs teens

are starting to use it more. Cannabis has been growing stronger and stronger over the years – a key reason why more people are ending up in hospital, say doctors.

Powerful varieties known as skunk now account for 94 per cent of cannabis consumed in Britain, according to recent research.

It contains at least four times as much of the main psychoactive compound tetrahydrocannabinol as previously dominant types of cannabis. 'THC' is strongly linked to increased risk of psychosis.

Yet there is a growing perception among youngsters that cannabis is harmless. Experts say many interpret the Government's decision to let doctors prescribe cannabis-based medicines as a green light to

smoke it – even though the medicines and street drugs have hugely different effects. Addiction specialist Dr Cyrus Abbasian said: 'The main reason we are seeing more cannabis-related hospital admissions is its increasing strength.'

In some areas cannabis strength has increased tenfold since the 1990s, from two to 20 per cent THC, he added, with less powerful forms so hard to find in the UK that users go online to buy from overseas.

Ex-mental health nurse Ian Hamilton, a lecturer at York University, said people were increasingly ending up in A&Es with 'absolutely terrifying' cannabis-induced psychotic episodes, as its growing strength meant they had no idea how much THC they were consuming. 'People

can see things, hear things, become hyper-anxious, or enter a state of "depersonalisation" where they don't feel they are real,' he said.

They can end up vomiting, while the anxiety can 'make your heart-rate go through the roof'.

Consultant psychologist Matthew Gaskell, of Leeds and York Partnership NHS Trust, said stronger cannabis – including the synthetic version spice – was leading to 'more cannabis dependence in addiction services, and great difficulty stopping' among regular users. He said: 'Acute intoxication can have severe effects including a rapid heart rate, vomiting, violent behaviour, seizures and suicidal thoughts.'

The NHS figures show there were 125,290 cannabis and spice-

related hospital admissions in England from April 2013 to March 2018, including 14,888 under-20s. Of those, nine were admissions of children under ten.

Researcher Hannah Fletcher, of HealthWatch Essex, a local watchdog, who interviewed 717 youngsters, said cannabis use was now prevalent among teens. One told her cannabis was 'everywhere' in secondary school. 'Some thought it was actually good for them,' she said.

Last Thursday, Home Secretary Sajid Javid announced that, from next month, doctors will be able to prescribe cannabis-based medicines. These usually contain low levels of THC. Mr Javid has made clear the Government has no plans to legalise recreational cannabis use.

medical marijuana laws that in states without legal marijuana.'

Such statistics have not dampened enthusiasm for the drug. Colorado's tax revenue from the trade last year was \$247 million from \$1.5 billion of sales.

The windfall offers no comfort to Lori Robinson, whose son Shane, 25, committed suicide at their family cabin near Yosemite National Park in 2012.

He began smoking cannabis in his teens and later used medicinal marijuana in California, where he had moved and where it was legal.

Mrs Robinson, the founder of campaign group Moms Strong, said: 'When you start legalising drugs – and marijuana is a drug – you start normalising drug use.'

between seven and ten per cent of newborn babies in the city were testing positive for THC, the main psychoactive constituent of cannabis.

While data about the effects of the legislation – and commercialisation – of cannabis across America is limited, Dr Simerville's concerns are shared by many in the medical world.



DANGEROUS ROAD: Customers queue up in Denver, Colorado, to buy recreational marijuana on the day it was legalised in January 2014

13 fast-food joints, 38 dope stores. Is this the high street of the future?

AMERICA'S appetite for fast food and coffee is well-known, but the residents of Pueblo in Colorado have almost three times as many marijuana stores as branches of McDonald's and Starbucks combined.

The 38 'high street' stores selling marijuana already dwarf the 13 selling either Big Macs or lattes – and the number is soon expected to overtake the town's 46 bars.

Unease about cannabis deepened when parents discovered that Pueblo's schools were being flooded with marijuana-laced sweets.

Two years ago, doctors held a press conference to call on the city's council to ban marijuana shops, but a vote on the proposal was defeated. Among those speaking out was paediatrician Dr Steven Simerville who claimed that

By Daniel Bates

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JUST as modish elite opinion swings ever more swiftly towards legalising marijuana, shocking and undeniable new evidence of its grave and frightening harms comes to light. Which will win? Fashion, and the prejudice of the chattering class? Or common sense?

The truth about this very dangerous and far-from-soft drug can no longer be hidden. As The Mail on Sunday reveals today, there have been more than 125,000 hospital admissions related to cannabis or similar drugs in the past five years. These are concentrated among the young. Just how ill did the users of this supposedly harmless drug have to be, for them to end up in hospital casualty departments? How many others suffered panic and misery alone and untreated?

Yet this country faces a grim race, between a fanatical and sometimes greedy campaign to decriminalise marijuana at all costs, and the accumulating evidence that such a move would be an irreparable disaster.

For years, the billionaire-backed proponents of a cannabis free-for-all have sneered at warnings offered by me and many others that the drug is a major danger to mental health. Where was the proof of the damage it did, they would ask, ignoring the tragic evidence in

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every town centre of homeless, shattered, trembling men and women, plainly broken by drug abuse. These wicked cynics have, I believe, known all along that many individuals and families would pay a high and painful price for their pleasure, wealth and convenience.

In much the same way, Big Tobacco knew for years that cigarettes were doing terrible damage to smokers, but carried on making millions from them and resisted attempts to restrict advertising and sales.

The marijuana lobby, who I call Big Dope, are equally ready to overlook the horror of irreversible mental illness, for what some of them see as a good cause, and others see as a pot of gold.

At a debate on the subject at Durham University on Monday, in which I opposed decriminalisation, supporters of drug legalisation openly conceded that marijuana does damage the mental health of some of its users.

But it seems they don't really care. They have dismissed as 'anecdotal' hundreds of individual stories in which the link between the drug and mental illness has been startling. Psychiatrists have little doubt. Dr Humphrey Needham-Bennett, medical director and consultant psychiatrist of the Cygnet Hospital in Sevenoaks, Kent, says that among his patients 'cannabis use is so common that I assume that people use or used it. It's quite surprising when people say, "No, I don't use drugs." Even then, they may not be telling the

The elites hellbent on legalising marijuana couldn't care less about the families they obliterate



By **PETER HITCHENS**
who's campaigned against legalisation for years

truth. Other psychiatrists report that cannabis use is now so common among the young that many who smoke it do not even regard it as a drug.

Yet, until very recently, there was hardly any research into the link, and when it took place, in a Swedish Army survey that showed a clear connection, it was ignored.

When the great foreign correspondent Patrick Cockburn bravely disclosed the harrowing story of his son Henry's descent into severe mental illness after

smoking marijuana at his Canterbury grammar school, he suddenly discovered that many friends and colleagues had been quietly hiding similar tragedies. He said he was 'amazed to discover how many friends had a relative disabled by schizophrenia. The common feature in these tragedies was that the victim had taken cannabis in significant quantities at a young age.'

So why did these facts have so little impact? As Patrick puts it 'supporters of decriminalisation in

the media and among the intelligentsia see cannabis as harmless and discount opposition to it as ill-informed prejudice'.

Patrick is too kind. In fact, an enormous, wealthy and powerful lobby wants marijuana laws liberalised at almost any cost, and will, if it is not stopped, force its views on this country very soon.

Some of these campaigners are guided by a weird and twisted idealism. They genuinely believe that a society in which we are free to drug ourselves into a

stupor will be better than the self-disciplined, self-restrained sobriety of the past.

Such 'libertarians' are headed by the Hungarian multi-billionaire George Soros, whose Open Society Foundations contributed \$200 million (£151 million) to campaigns in the USA and around the world to liberalise drug laws between 1994 and 2014. Much of his money is channelled through a body called the Drug Policy Alliance. But he is far from alone, according to Forbes Magazine. Many mega-rich Americans have also contributed large piles of dollars to such campaigns, for example the recent 'Proposition 64' ballot which legalised marijuana – including advertising of the drug – in California.

But these forces are not confined to the USA. The social-media multi-millionaire Paul Birch similarly backs a utopian British campaign for drug liberalisation called Volteface, whose advisory board includes such grand figures as Fiona Measham, Professor of Criminology at Durham University.

It is also adorned by the veteran campaigner Mike Trace. Mr Trace, who was once 'Deputy Drug Tsar'

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for the Blair government, resigned from a key United Nations drug post in January 2003 after leaked documents showed he had privately described himself as a 'fifth column' for liberalisation, despite having been hired to reduce demand for drugs.

Perhaps most interesting of all of those on the Volteface advisory board is Brendan Kennedy, described as the 'CEO (Chief Executive Officer) of Privateer Holdings and President of Tilray and Leafly'. Leafly is the world's largest cannabis website. Tilray is a Canadian marijuana company. It is owned by Privateer Holdings, a private equity firm whose other companies sell cannabis products for legal recreational use in America. Privateer Holdings helped pay for a visit to Seattle for Tory MP and former Minister Crispin Blunt, an increasingly noisy campaigner for drug liberalisation. Parliament's register of MPs' interests says the aim of the journey was 'to understand the regulatory, licensing and economic issues around the cannabis industry in Washington State'.

Tilray, meanwhile, is booming, perhaps because of Canada's recent decision to legalise marijuana, or perhaps because of the USA's plans to import Canadian-grown marijuana for 'medical' use. In July, Tilray became the first marijuana company to be