

Oxford Union Debate

February 23, 2019

There are some drugs it may be wise to say no to, but cannabis is not one of them.

Alcohol for example—it's responsible for around 10% of disease and deaths in the UK, and for social harms on the order of 20 billion pounds/year.

Tobacco is another. The NHS estimates almost 20% of all deaths aged 35 and over were caused by tobacco.

Or prescription opioids and tranquilizers. Hundreds of Britons die every year from their misuse. In the United States, that figure is in the the tens of thousands.

All of these drugs cause massive individual and social harm, yet all of them are legal—we have already said yes to them.

In contrast, over the course of thousands of years of human consumption, nobody has ever died from cannabis. Even enormous doses of cannabis are unable to produce organ failure or death.

To the contrary, cannabis in fact is one of the most powerful and safest therapeutic substances on the planet.

It is cited as a treatment for everything from insomnia to epilepsy to cancer in the world's earliest written medical texts, including Chinese, Egyptian, Ayurvedic and Hebrew physicians.

Cannabis was introduced to western medicine by Dr. William O'Shaughnessy, a physician for the British East India Company who moved to Calcutta in 1833. There he learned of the widespread use of cannabis in Ayurvedic medicine, and conducted the first known scientific experiments investigating its efficacy.

Those experiments convinced him cannabis was an effective therapy for rheumatism, cholera, tetanus, hydrophobia, epilepsy, and many other conditions.

O'Shaughnessy was such a fan of cannabis that he manufactured and imported a potent cannabis extract—Squire's Syrup—upon his return to England in 1841.

Among the many British physicians who adopted it enthusiastically was Sir John Russell Reynolds, physician to Queen Victoria's household, who found it effective for both major and minor ailments.

Reynolds regarded cannabis as the most useful treatment for what we now call Alzheimer's, and prescribed it for the Queen's menstrual cramps.

In 1893, the British Parliament ordered the first and still one of the most comprehensive governmental studies of cannabis. The Indian Hemp Drugs Commission interviewed over 1,000 witnesses, including Indian Ayurvedic practitioners, British surgeons, police officers, and colonial administrators. Its report found that moderate use of cannabis is not appreciably harmful, does not produce injurious effects on the mind, and is not connected with crime.

Every serious, evidence based governmental commission since then has confirmed these conclusions (Canal Zone, LaGuardia, Schafer).

And everyday observation and common sense bear out these findings.

Cannabis is the most commonly used illicit substance on the planet, and has been for a long time. If it really did the things its critics claim it does, jails and insane asylums would be overflowing with cannabis users, the streets would be full of their violence and mayhem, and ever growing armies of junkies would be a constant daily menace.

Hundreds of modern scientific studies have confirmed the uses of cannabis cited in the ancient medical texts, along with a host of new ones—including HIV/AIDS, Multiple Sclerosis, and Cerebral Palsy.

Key to our modern understanding of cannabis was the discovery in the 1990s of a previously unknown neurotransmitter system that endogenously produces many of the same—or virtually the same—chemical compounds found in the cannabis plant.

The Endo Cannabinoid System is found in almost every part of the human body, including all organs and connective tissue, the circulatory system, the immune system, the brain and the skin.

No matter where it is located, its purpose remains the same—to preserve and maintain homeostasis, which simply means a stable internal environment free of harmful external influences, the body’s state of natural balance.

My favorite example of this modulating effect comes from an Israeli senior center study. Every patient on cannabis therapy experienced an immediate improvement in mood and reduction in nightmares, but the most interesting result was seen in ideal body mass measurements. Overweight patients dropped weight and came closer to their IBM, while underweight patients gained weight to come closer to their IBM.

Another example of homeostasis is the way cannabis fights cancer, by interrupting angiogenesis-- the process by which cancer cells appropriate blood vessels normally used for other purposes.

The introduction of cannabinoids into these cells slows and then ends the process of angiogenesis. The cancer cells wither and eventually die. Natural balance is restored—without horrifying side effects, without damage to surrounding tissue.

We could easily say yes to cannabis on the basis of these properties--this therapeutic treasure chest-- alone, but the benefits of cannabis are not limited to fighting illness-- they also extend to strengthening wellness.

It is a safe and natural remedy for many of the more common challenges of modern life; including stress, anxiety, insomnia, anger management, low libido, even indigestion.

Then there are the many overlooked wellness benefits of cannabis, often misunderstood as “just getting high”: its power to spark creativity; extend patience, and wake up a sense of play; to enhance the taste of a meal, the sound of music, the smell of a flower, or the touch of a lover’s skin. It’s ability to enhance introspection and compassion and kindness, facilitate more profound spiritual experiences, heighten appreciation of nature, and promote peaceful conflict resolution.

These properties are not just desirable and valuable. In a world increasingly plagued by intolerance, violence, and pollution, they could prove to be essential to our survival as a species.

And I have not even mentioned the industrial potential of cannabis—a superior eco-friendly raw material for any product made from petroleum or cotton or trees.

If there was ever a plant to say yes to, it is cannabis. If there was ever a time to do it, that time is now.

See my video of that speech **here**.