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Issue: **'Tobacco, Alcohol and Cannabis all 'Gateway' Drugs.'**

[*"Permissibility, availability and accessibility - all increase consumption."* Dalgarno Institute.]

"I can't think of any heroin addict who didn't start with alcohol and cannabis as a young person." So declared nationally awarded Judge Roger Dive (Paramatta Drug Court) speaking on developing Drug Court Initiatives during 2011 ¹

The pathway of abstinence to initiation in illicit drug use was touted for years as a progression, known as 'Gateway Theory', affirmed after studies on teenagers were conducted in one of the earliest evidence based research papers published in 1975. The same researcher, Professor Denise Kandel of Columbia University and colleagues, then revisited the study and updated the results on patterns of drug use on the cohort, now young adults around 25. These results were published in a series of articles in the American Journal of Public Health in 1984, the following is a summary of findings:

"The sequence of involvement into drugs progresses from the use of at least one legal drug, alcohol and/or cigarettes, to marijuana, and from marijuana to other illicit drugs, and/or prescribed psychoactive drugs." ²

Writing in his preface of the 1990's 5th edition of *Keep Off the Grass*, Gabriel Nahas summarises the evidence supporting the theory connecting marijuana use to other illicit drug use.

"Marijuana users are sixty-six times more likely to use cocaine subsequently than subjects who have never consumed marijuana. This 1990 survey of PRIDE documents further the fact that marijuana is a "gateway" drug to more destructive dependency-producing drugs such as heroin or cocaine. Such a most significant risk of escalating from marijuana to cocaine was reported by Kandel and colleagues in 1975 (Science 190 (1975): 912). Clayton and Voss (U.S. Journal of Drug and Alcohol Dependence, Jan. 1982) confirmed Kandel's observation and reported that the risk for a marijuana user to progress to cocaine consumption is ten times greater than the risk of a heavy tobacco smoker to develop cancer of the lung. Dr. Herbert Kleber (Journal of Clinical Psychiatry, 1988, 48:3) reports that 75% of frequent users of marijuana have used cocaine at least once. It is a fact that the major epidemic of cocaine consumption besetting the country since the mid-eighties was preceded by the marijuana epidemic of the seventies." ²

The Gateway Theory lost some traction due to a number of factors including, confusion and overlap with social gateway theory, the ignoring of the imperative early initiation issue and data (that the younger you start using substances, the more likely you are to progress to using Other Illicit Drugs OI) which also coincided with a push by pro-cannabis propagandists to 'sanitise' cannabis use in adults.

Yet data has continued to emerge over the last few years as to substance use and its impact on brain chemistry and physiology - particularly on the adolescent brain and consequently on illicit drug progression pathways. The latest data that considers not merely substance type, but most vitally, the age of initiation, clearly affirms 'Gateway Theory'.

Only this month data was published from a significant French study that looked at cannabis use patterns on the initiation into other drugs.

*A nationwide retrospective cohort on drug use was reconstituted on 29,393 teenagers. A Markov multi-state model was fitted, modeling all possible pathways from initial abstinence to cannabis initiation, daily cannabis use and OI initiation. The model was adjusted for tobacco and alcohol use. The risk for OI initiation appeared 21 times higher among cannabis experimenters and 124 times higher among daily cannabis users than among non-users. Tobacco and alcohol use were associated with a greater risk of moving on to cannabis initiation (hazard ratio (HR)=1.2 for tobacco initiation, HR=2.6 for daily tobacco use and HR=2.8 for drunkenness initiation). The results of this study provide a confirmation of a stage process in drug use, mediated by cannabis and liable to lead to OI experiment. **This is compatible with the literature on the gateway theory, but goes further by modeling the entire sequence of use. OI experiment could be a consequence of initial opportunity to use the more accessible illicit drug, cannabis.**³ [emphasis added]*

Again, the evidence points to the key issue in all this as being the age of onset of use. The vast majority of demographic data emerging across most societies is revealing that tobacco, alcohol and cannabis use are all and almost always, initiated in early to late adolescence. The French study also reported...

*"...the influence of early initiation appears very deleterious because it is liable to compromise cognitive learning, to be linked with psychiatric disorders or to lead to social problems like truancy or delinquency. Thus adults aged over 25 who initiated cannabis use before the age of 15 report a lifetime use of cocaine in 62% of cases, a lifetime use of heroin in 9% of cases, and abuse of psychoactive medication in 54% of cases. These percentages appear to be much higher than those observed in the general population."*³

Despite the relentless push by pro-drug lobbyists to minimise or marginalise the impact of cannabis, the long existing anecdotal evidence affirmed again that Judge Dive's observation is clear – The Gateway Path exists and our young are the most vulnerable.

The Dalgarno Institute continues to...

- a) **Promote Supply and Demand reduction strategies including the continued criminalisation of Cannabis and all other current illicit drugs.**
- b) **In turn, recommends the use of 'Drug Courts' as diversion programs for non-trafficking drug offenses.**
- c) **Promote and deliver effective anti-drug education programs to all early secondary school students**
- d) **Recommend an increase in aggressive media and viral campaigns warning against the use of cannabis and other illicit drugs.**

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Endnotes

¹ http://newsstore.fairfax.com.au/apps/viewDocument.ac;jsessionid=A4E5CD44141DC53159EE1D5F853A9773?sy=afr&pb=all_ffx&dt=selectRange&dr=1month&so=relevance&sf=text&sf=headline&rc=10&rm=200&sp=brs&cls=584&clsPage=1&docID=NCH110806199646B34RH (cited 19/1/12)

² The Gateway Drug Theory: Marijuana use and other drug use. <http://www.drugscience.org/Petition/C6C.html> (cited 19/1/12)

³ Mayet A, Legleye S, Falissard B, Chau N.; Cannabis use stages as predictors of subsequent initiation with other illicit drugs among French adolescents: use of a multi-state model; Addictive Behaviours. (soft release Jan 12)2012 Feb; 37(2):160-6. Epub 2011 Sep 17.

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