

Not your mother's reefer (National Post May 22, 2008)

[National Post](#) - Thursday May 22nd, 2008

Barbara Kay, National Post

Published: Thursday, May 22, 2008

The 18th-century poet Alexander Pope was a keen student of human nature, and often delivered bits of timeless wisdom in memory-friendly rhyming couplets.

One that opinion writers in particular should take to heart from his *Essay on Criticism* is: "A little learning is a dangerous thing; drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: there shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again."

The words "intoxicate the brain" bring to mind the Post's 2007 editorial on marijuana, enunciated in response to evidence that Canada's marijuana consumption was the highest in the industrialized world: "What is really remarkable about Canada's status as a cannabis capital is that if you were to set out looking for reasons to worry about it ? you would have an awfully hard time finding them. Legalizing pot makes sense."

What was the editorial board smoking when these words were written? In fact, one would not "have an awfully hard time" finding reasons to worry if one were actually open to finding them. In fact, it would be quite easy. Legalizing pot "makes sense" only to those who have a "little learning" on the changed nature of cannabis over the last 25 years.

In 1997, the liberal U. K. newspaper *The Independent* launched a campaign to decriminalize marijuana. Encouraged, 16,000 pro-cannabis activists marched to London's Hyde Park, a show of strength credited with the government's subsequent downgrading of cannabis' status as a legally restricted substance.

Since then, "skunk," as Britons call the hybrid form of cannabis in current usage, has offered users a 25-fold increase in tetrahydrocannabinol (THC), cannabis' psychoactive ingredient. The mental and physical effects of this chemical change have been dramatic.

In March 2007, *The Lancet*, Britain's leading medical journal, declared cannabis to be more dangerous and addictive than LSD and Ecstasy. About the same time, Professor Colin Blakemore, chief of the Medical Research Council (and in 1997, the moral authority behind *The Independent's* liberalization campaign) unequivocally reversed his cannabis-friendliness: "The link between cannabis and psychosis is quite clear now; it wasn't 10 years ago."

As a result, *The Independent* last year offered its readership a fulsome apology: "If only we had known then what we can reveal today ?"

Psychiatry professor Robin Murray of London's Institute of Psychiatry estimates that cannabis usage is causally linked to a full 10% of the U. K.'s 250,000 bipolar patients: "The number of people taking cannabis may not be rising, but what people are

taking is much more powerful ? we may see more people getting ill as a consequence."

Indeed, just this past February, the *European Respiratory Journal* reported on a New Zealand study indicating that long term cannabis use increases the annual risk of lung cancer in young adults by 8% for every year of use.

In order to better understand this sea change in experts' opinions and how it applies to Canada, I spoke with Ontariobased addiction counsellor and treatment/prevention specialist Don Smyth. As in Britain, Smyth explained, kids here are smoking a hybrid Middle-Eastern/ Asian variety of cannabis that is far more intense and addictive than past varieties.

Here, skunk is known as "bud," because, as one young adolescent in Smyth's practice told his 70s-minded mother: "Mom, we don't smoke the leaves. We throw the leaves out. We just smoke the buds."

In 1970, pot contained 1% THC. Bud contains 20% THC. Imagine a glass of wine or beer with a similarly proportioned alcohol content and consider the "rush" it would provide.

Thus, Smyth and others well-informed on the subject claim it is misleading to identify this super-strength cannabis as a "soft" drug. "Pot or weed essentially no longer exists," Smyth says, grimly concluding, "I am absolutely haunted by the irreparable harms this so-called innocuous drug has brought to the lives of [young users]."

British politicians have "drunk large" of the evidence, and reversed their position of moral indulgence. Two weeks ago, the Home Office in the U. K. announced: "Cannabis will be reclassified as a Class B drug, sending a strong message that

the drug is harmful."

The verdict on the new marijuana is in, and it's "guilty." I would therefore respectfully ask the Post to reconsider its editorial stance on the legalization of "pot," clearly a superannuated description of cannabis today, and in future commentary on this issue, so critical to our youth's health, exercise a little more intellectual-- ahem-- sobriety.

bkay@nationalpost.com