

Researchers explore marijuana and mental health

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A team of mental health experts from the University of Western Sydney say young people who have developed a dependence on cannabis are likely to continue using the drug following the diagnosis of a mental illness.

To find out their reasons why, the Social Justice Social Change Research Centre (SJSC) at UWS will commence a study of the links between marijuana and mental health in 2009.

Cannabis is one of the most widely used drugs in the world. In Australia, forty to fifty percent of young people admit to trying cannabis at least once.

Associate Professor Meg Smith, the lead UWS researcher from SJSC, says a high proportion of people living with mental illness also have a co-occurring substance abuse problem.

"Experts are aware that cannabis use can precipitate the onset of mental illnesses such as depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia in vulnerable individuals," says Associate Professor Smith.

"But little is known about why so many young people continue to use a drug that has direct negative impacts on their mental health."

The study will focus on young people with a history of cannabis use between the ages of 18 and 30, with the ultimate aim of determining why they continued or ceased to use the drug.

Co-researcher from the School of Social Sciences at UWS, Sharyn McGee, says it can be difficult for carers and mental health workers to understand why a young person would choose to continue using a drug that adds to the complexity of their treatment and exacerbates their symptoms of mental illness.

"Aside from their base dependency on the drug, many young people who use cannabis do not see it as a problem. In fact, they may see the drug as a means of improving their self confidence, creativity or sexual prowess," says Ms McGee.

"For some people, using cannabis can also have the benefits of relieving their symptoms of depression, alleviating cognitive difficulties and nullifying the side effects of some medications."

Through an analysis of health promotion campaigns, the UWS project also aims to establish the effectiveness of strategies which aim to deter young people from experimenting with cannabis.

It's hoped that the final data may be used to develop a new health promotion program aimed at young people living with mental illness who are at risk of developing a substance abuse problem.

The results of the study could also contribute to more effective strategies for reducing or eliminating cannabis use in young people with mental illnesses.

Provided by University of Western Sydney

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