

# The Case for Medical Marijuana in Australia

by Daniel Reid

As with most contemporary issues facing societies in the Western world, Australia is once again lagging behind America and Europe in the matter of medical marijuana. Rather than facing the issue head-on and making a rational policy decision, the government here simply buries its head in the sand, raising it from time to time just long enough to say, "She'll be all right, mate, no worries," then plunging it back into the darkness. As usual, the only glimpse of reality we get here in Australia on this topic is the infrequent television documentary on how it's done in America. The question is this: should Australia legalize marijuana for medical use, and perhaps even for recreational purposes, by decriminalizing and taxing it? Or should Australians continue to get harassed, arrested, embarrassed, and sometimes imprisoned for possession and use of what amounts to no more than a physiologically harmless and medicinally useful natural herb?

A few years ago, my wife's father and sister came to visit us in Australia from Taiwan, and as we were strolling through town one sunny afternoon, we witnessed two big, beefy policemen with a sniffer dog on a leash stop a group of young people on the street and instruct them to stand still while they signaled their dog to sniff them down for possession of marijuana. The dog went straight to the crotch of the only woman in the group and shoved its snout therein, eliciting a howl of protest from her and a loud snort of laughter from the two cops.

"What are they doing to that girl?" my father-in-law asked me in Chinese. I told him they were making the dog sniff her for marijuana. "Why?" he asked. I tried to explain that marijuana was illegal in Australia, and this was one of the ways they use here to find out if people have marijuana in their possession. "But why?" he asked again. "Isn't marijuana legal in America?" Like Australians, people in Taiwan see America as a beacon of progress in such matters. "And why are they letting a dog sniff that poor girl's body in public?" he asked with growing agitation. "That's no way to treat a woman in public! It's disgraceful!" Then, shaking his head, he quietly added, "How can my own daughter live in a country like this? It's barbaric!"

I had to agree with him, and I felt embarrassed for Australia. He was 87 years old when this happened, but he was an intelligent man, and he followed world news with avid interest on television at home, so he was fully informed on the issue of medical marijuana in America, and he knew it had been long ago been legalized in my home state of California, and more recently in other states, as well as in other countries such as Portugal. "Why is it still illegal here?" he asked. I didn't know how to answer his question in a way that made any sense to him or to myself, so I decided to try to sort out this question in my own mind, as well as for others, by writing this article about it.

I'm not going to cite the many scientific studies here that have conclusively proven, beyond any doubt, that marijuana is a mild, non-addictive, physically harmless euphoric that also has numerous medical benefits for human health. All that information is readily available to both the government and the people of Australia via the internet, should anyone here wish to read the facts of the matter rather than just bark in the wind with preconceived notions that have long been discredited elsewhere in world.

Instead, I'm simply going to raise a few key questions about this issue that should make it obvious

even to a 12-year-old that using marijuana should not be a crime in Australia, and that the ongoing war on this harmless medicinal herb is unjustified, and not only does untold damage to Australians, but also makes this country look ridiculous in the eyes of more progressive countries, as well as to my father-in-law. Hopefully this article will also catch the eye of someone - anyone - in the government here who has the political guts to take up the baton and run with it, perhaps a Greenie in the Senate.

Let's start with a quick look at what's happening now in America, which Australia often follows in other matters, such as marching off to war against countries that have previously done no harm to Australia, and basing the national health care system here on the dangerous, expensive, and often addictive drugs peddled to this country by the American pharmaceutical industry. Then we'll take a quick look at the obvious benefits to Australia of making this safe, inexpensive, and medically effective herb available to all Australians.

California was the first state in America to legalize marijuana for medical use way back in 1996, and it since then it has caused no problems there, while emptying the prisons of many inmates who were formerly incarcerated for using it. I was born in California, and I still have many friends there who use marijuana, some of whom switched from addictive prescription drugs like anti-depressants, sleeping pills, tranquilizers, and pain killers to various forms of medical marijuana when it became legal there. They all tell me that the herb relieves their symptoms far better than the chemicals ever did, without having any negative side effects.

I visited a medical marijuana dispensary with my brother last time I visited there, and it looked like a cross between herbal pharmacy, organic market, and adult candy shop. An amazing assortment of products were on display, with something for every ailment and taste, including smokes, tinctures, candies, sub-lingual lozenges, and vapors. I tried a few, and they greatly improved my normally deficient sleep, uplifted the downshift in mood that I usually experience when in America, and completely eliminated my tendency to drink too much alcohol when I'm there.

The state of Colorado, which took it one step further by legalizing marijuana across the board for medical as well as recreational use, now rakes in so much tax income from marijuana that by law the state government is obliged to give every resident of that state a cash rebate. Instead, however, the state is holding a referendum to ask the people to allow the government to use all that extra money to upgrade crumbling roads and bridges, to expand public parks in major cities, to upgrade the educational system, and to improve health care services there, and it looks like the people will say yes to that. Imagine if NSW were to legalize and tax marijuana, then use the river of tax revenue that flows into the treasury to repair the notoriously pot-holed streets in this state, to fix and restore the rusting railways, the creaking bridges, and the dilapidated schools, and to otherwise improve public facilities and services in this state. How good would that be?

A very important and relevant finding that has been verified by numerous studies and surveys conducted in American states that have legalized marijuana is the fact that usage of addictive narcotic prescription pain-killers like oxycontin and vicodin has plummeted by up to 40%, while sales of hard liquor in those states have also shown a significant decline. Not only does this provide strong positive evidence in support of legalizing marijuana in Australia, where abuse of narcotic pain-killers as well as hard liquor is prevalent, it also clearly reveals two of the primary forces working against legalization of marijuana here, namely the Big Pharma and Big Booze industries, who stand to lose millions of dollars from the sale of their addictive substances to Australians.

That's enough about America. Now let's turn our attention to Australia itself, and start by looking at the Australian government's ongoing war against its own citizens who use this harmless medicinal herb, with the police serving as their storm troopers. This is the only country on earth that I know of that still uses sniffer dogs to harass people in public places in search of miniscule amounts of marijuana, such as that hapless woman who my father-in-law witnessed getting her pubis eagerly sniffed by a dog the first time he came to visit us in Australia. It's still a common sight, especially on holidays and at festivals, to have these dogs poking their noses into our pockets, our bags, our cars, and our crotches, like bird dogs sniffing for quail in the "bush" (pun fully intended).

There's also the charming practice of stopping cars on the road for no other reason than to make the driver lick a stick on a breathalyzer device that gives a 50% false-positive reading, in order to determine if you smoked a joint that morning before driving to the market, or was it last night that you smoked, or perhaps last week? No matter, you're busted, mate! I can almost hear the burly cop crowing with pride to his colleagues at the local police station, as he drags you in for detention and barks, "I bagged another one!"

Meanwhile, on a nearby highway, an elderly woman on oxycontin or valium falls asleep at the wheel and crashes head-on with an oncoming car, killing herself and paralyzing for life the other driver. I know of precisely such a case that happened in 2002, and the paralyzed driver was a friend of mine. But that's OK: the dead driver had a prescription for it.

Perhaps too the police could better use their time and our tax money to stop and arrest those drunken louts who routinely go home and beat their wives, or to track down punks who break into our shops and homes to grab whatever they can, or the guys who sneak around poorly lit parking lots trying to steal our cars. But no, the police are nowhere to be seen in those places because they're too busy busting people for self-medicating with marijuana.

A major problem with this issue in Australia is the fact that the government here routinely ignores the abundant scientific evidence that clearly proves that marijuana is not in any way a threat to public health, public order, or public morality. Instead, the state listens to the advice of clerics who like to meddle in these matters, rather than focusing their full attention on ministering to the religious needs of their flock, or it takes counsel from self-appointed guardians of public morality who know nothing whatsoever about marijuana, much less have tried it themselves. I don't know of a single case of death by overdose from smoking or eating marijuana products anywhere in the world, but I know of many cases of men and women dying from excessive consumption of alcohol, or from taking pharmaceutical drugs prescribed by their own doctors. My own mother died as a result of using too much of both, which is a common cause of death in Australia as well as America.

Then there's the hackneyed and long discredited theory that marijuana is a "gateway drug" to the use of hard drugs like heroin and methamphetamine, an argument so stupid that it defies belief that any government spokesman would even dare utter it these days. If that's the case, then here in Australia the biggest gateway to the use of hard drugs would surely be beer, because everyone in this country drinks beer long before they smoke pot. I haven't noticed any warning labels on beer bottles in Australia stating, "Warning: beer can lead to the use of heroin." Give us a break, guys!

Now, let's get down to brass tacks, which in Australia means money. Legalizing marijuana and allowing the production of the entire range of products made from hemp would open up a whole new industry in Australia, and a very profitable one at that. If ever a country needed new ways for people

to make money, it's Australia. The range of new products—“medicinal, recreational, as well as many other varieties—that can be made from hemp is phenomenal, including dozens of strains of marijuana for smoking, vaporizing, and munching, hemp clothing that's cheaper and far more durable than cotton, sturdy building materials made of hemp that are more flexible and last longer than timber, and much more. I even have a friend in Byron Bay who makes Australia's iconic didgeridoo from a hemp composite that's stronger and far more resonant than wood, and it's causing a sensation throughout the musical business in Australia as well as overseas. Rarely has any material lent itself to such a wide range of creative and profitable enterprise as hemp.

Speaking of money, it should be obvious by now that state governments in Australia could easily resolve their perennial shortage of funds to provide people with basic public facilities and services simply by legalizing, licensing, and taxing marijuana. A sales tax on consumption of marijuana would by itself probably balance the budgets in every state in the federation, and finally we'd have properly paved roads, beautiful public parks and playgrounds for children, toll-free bridges and parking, and no more of that embarrassing and needless harassment from the police, who I sincerely doubt really want to do this in the first place. They know perfectly well that marijuana is harmless and that they have far more important duties to perform, but they are forced by numbskull politicians to go out on the streets with trained dogs to sniff crotches, to stop cars and make people lick useless electro-lolly sticks, and to risk their lives buzzing around in helicopters at enormous public expense to look for patches of hemp growing on the ground below.

So why is it still illegal in Australia to smoke a joint or eat a cannabis cookie? And why on earth do the Australian people continue to tolerate such abuse from those whose salaries their taxes pay? Like so many other anomalies in this country, I have no idea why, other than the obvious factors mentioned above. There are no rational reasons for this nonsense. As it used to be in America, the issue of marijuana in Australia is a political football to be kicked around by politicians at election time. Instead of embarrassing Australia's gay community with a public referendum on whether it's all right, mate, for members of the same gender to get married, I dare the government to hold a referendum on legalizing marijuana in Australia. They'll be surprised by the margin of victory in favor, and the results will embarrass no one but the politicians themselves.

I could go on and on with this commentary, but I think what I've said here is enough to make the point clear to anyone whose mind is not already locked up tight against reason, like a bank safe against burglars. And if I write much more, it gives prospective publications an excuse not to print it on the basis of length, rather than admitting they won't publish it in fear of violating political correctness in this country. The fact remains that this is not a political issue. It's a matter of public health and welfare.

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