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Press release

Grave concerns about the attempt to legalise cannabis cultivation in Sri Lanka

Recently, there have been several requests to legalise the cultivation of cannabis, a dangerous drug according to the **Poisons, Opium, and Dangerous Drugs Ordinance** of Sri Lanka. We, as mental health specialists in this country, are very concerned about this, as cannabis has been shown to cause extensive, and sometimes irreversible, damage to physical, psychological and social health of our people and communities, especially our children and adolescents, and future generations.

Cannabis, classified as a dangerous drug by the United Nations as well, contains many toxic chemicals. Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) is the most addictive chemical as it acts on neural receptors in the human brain (1). Cannabis is shown to cause or exacerbate many serious mental illnesses including schizophrenia and other psychoses, bipolar affective disorder, anxiety disorders including panic attacks, depression, dependence (addiction), among many other mental health issues such as self-harm/suicide (2). It is also known to cause impairment of brain development, intelligence and education in children and youth, which is a grave concern (3). Cannabis smoke contains carcinogens and irritants, and causes chronic bronchitis and increase risk of lung infections (4). Cannabis intoxication has been clearly linked to increased road traffic accidents including fatal crashes (5). Cannabis smoke is also harmful to others who are around smokers, especially pregnant mothers and their babies (6). Cannabis use increases the risk of using other illicit drugs.

We as Psychiatrists of this country, daily witness many young people becoming mentally ill after using cannabis, including the over the counter preparations of cannabis in the form of 'madana modaka'. We also painfully witness the neglect of children, increased family problems, violence and poverty, when the father uses cannabis, as well as other substances.

It appears that one reason given to justify legalisation of growing cannabis is scarcity of supply of cannabis for Ayurvedic medical practice. The amount needed for Ayurvedic medicine could easily be supplied as in current practice through confiscated cannabis produce. Derivatives of opium are also considered dangerous drugs and are used by both Ayurvedic and Western systems of medicine, with no calls for legalisation of growing the poppy plant! A well-developed system of obtaining opium derivatives is in operation and legalised cultivation is not a necessity at all.

Cannabis derivatives are not important medicines in the Western Medical system. They are very infrequently used in rare cases of neuropathic pain in AIDS patients, in multiple sclerosis and for vomiting. There are many alternatives, and more effective, medicines available for these conditions, while the scientific evidence base for effectiveness of cannabis derivatives are either low or questionable.

Many organised groups and persons advocate through social media to legalise cannabis cultivation citing bogus benefits of cannabis with no scientific evidence to support their false claims. It is imperative to investigate the true objectives and the agenda of these forces, as what they essentially support is the cultivation of genetically modified cannabis plants commercially produced by foreign companies.

Cannabis is classified as a dangerous narcotic in international conventions dealing with drugs. Cultivation of cannabis is prohibited by law, namely the Poisons, Opium and Dangerous Drugs Ordinances of Sri Lanka. Regrettably, there appears to be a concerted heavily funded campaign to influence certain leaders and decision makers to change this law, paving way to popularisation of cannabis as a legal narcotic drug.

Cannabis will not bring economic development for this country. There cannot be an economic benefit by damaging the physical, psychological and social health of our society. As is already shown by health economics related to alcohol and tobacco, the net result would be a huge long-term economical loss and an impediment to the development of the country.

Our country is already burdened and suffering due to heroin and other illicit drug of abuse. We are thankful to the government for taking effective measures to combat this by its actions to curb the supply of these dangerous drugs. The Sri Lanka College of Psychiatrists, the professional body of Psychiatrists in Sri Lanka, earnestly requests the government not to legalise the cultivation of cannabis.

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