

Marijuana: It Can Blow Your Mind:

... the link between dope and mental illness

ON THURSDAY 16 June MHACA hosted a free community information evening on the link between chronic marijuana use and the development of mental illness in young people. Even though it was a cold and rainy night up to 50 people attended - a broad mix of service providers, teachers and parents ... and it was especially great to see one young person.

The aim of the Community Forum was to raise awareness about potential side effects of marijuana use, and to provide an opportunity for open discussion with a panel of professionals.

The feature of the evening was the screening of the ABC Four Corners documentary *Messing With Heads*, which highlighted the dangers of dope smoking for people under 20 years. As one young man revealed, "imagine taking every single emotion, memory, experience and tablet all into one ... and those fighting with each other to see who is the victor."

The eye-opening film stimulated some interesting questions and answers:

- It was recognised that in cases of dual diagnosis - if someone has a drug addiction as well as mental illness - it can be difficult to distinguish where one stops and the others starts, which can also make it difficult to medicate.
- While it may be easier to work with a problem when it is identified, diagnosing someone with a mental illness can also have equally negative repercussions, such as attracting societal prejudice and stigma. As *Messing With Heads* revealed, it is every parent's worst fear to discover their child may have a lifelong mental illness.

- A dilemma faced by both professionals and young people is that the symptoms of a mental illness can drive someone to numb their pain with drugs or alcohol, but this only exacerbates the original problem.
- The issue of dope smoking in indigenous communities was recognised as a significant problem. While accessing resources can be difficult, crucial steps need to be taken to deter early starters and/or prolonged use in communities.
- Some of the reasons why young people turn to marijuana were discussed, and a lack of purpose and belonging in the community was identified as a central cause of distress.
- The forum also highlighted the lack of youth-specific mental health services in Alice Springs. While there is some preventative work happening within some organisations, only one or two services work specifically with young people and mental illness.
- The importance of strong support was also highlighted. The two main young people in the documentary both had caring families as well as access to highly specialised treatment centres. The question warrants asking, would they have recovered had they not had these supports?



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While prevention is clearly better than cure, young people and marijuana do mix - though not for many positive reasons. While 'getting out of it' offers temporary distraction, the side-effects are far more permanent and damaging.

In treating the symptoms we also need to look at the causes - from what are young people seeking to escape? Where have "we as a society" lost our way when young people seek to get high on drugs instead of getting high on life?

As one of the panel members highlighted, the responsibility and care of young people's mental, emotional and social wellbeing doesn't just rest with parents - it rests with the whole community in which they live. ✕

Thank You to Panel Members

Thank you to MHACA's chairperson, Steve Fisher, who facilitated the forum, and to our panel of experts which comprised of (from L to R):

- Sara: Manager @ Alice Springs Youth Accommodation and Support Services
- Kath Broadbent: Program Manager @ Drug and Alcohol Services Assn
- Raymond Campbell: Aboriginal Mental Health Worker @ Central Australian Aboriginal Congress: SEWB
- Marcus Tabart: Psychiatrist @ Central Australian Mental Health Service
- Phil Walcott: School Counsellor @ St Philips High School
- Andrew Scholz: Clinical Nurse on the Clinical Team @ ADSCA

