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U. S. Public Health Service Hospital,  
Lexington, Kentucky.

April 2, 1938.

Mr. A. Cecil Snyder,  
United States Attorney,  
San Juan, Puerto Rico.

Dear Mr. Snyder:

I have your letter of March 14, 1938, in which you state that the Honorable Robert A. Cooper, Judge of the United States District Court for Puerto Rico is interested in acquiring information to guide him in imposing sentences in marihuana cases. I regret that I could not get around to this before but I have been away from the station.

Marihuana addiction has come to the attention of the authorities in the United States and more particularly to the attention of laymen during the last ten or fifteen years. There has been an actual increase in addiction but a large part of the literature on the subject, especially the lay literature, owes its inception to propoganda of persons bent on saving the world from something, and of course writers who get paid for their writing have to make their articles interesting.

It has been said with some probability of truth that there are about 200,000,000 marihuana users in the world. These are mostly in Eastern countries such as Egypt, Asia Minor, India, etc., where the drug has been used for ages. Addiction is more prevalent in the southern part of the United States, especially along the Mexican border. It is also said to be fairly prevalent in Puerto Rico, but I have no definite knowledge about that. Marihuana in various countries may be smoked, chewed, or taken as an infusion, but in the United States the drug is taken mostly by smoking. The word "marihuana" was originated in Mexico. The real name for the drug is "cannabis sativa" and it is commonly known in the literature as cannabis indica.

Marihuana does not cause the same kind of addiction as does opium and its preparations in that a person does not become physically addicted to it so that he must have the drug to maintain comfort. It is taken for its intoxicating effects and for the thrill that it is supposed to give. Possibly the advertisement in the newspapers causes many young people to give it at least one trial. I am quite sure that most of the marihuana that is taken in the United States is taken somewhat as alcohol is by persons who go out on a party, for instance, Saturday night srees, etc., although there are doubtless a number of persons who have got into the habit of smoking the cigarettes daily.

Marihuana continuously taken in large quantities does more harm to the physical constitution than any preparation of opium. It is said that in Egypt it causes perhaps 25 or 30 per cent of the insanity, although I doubt whether such a large proportion is caused by it. Insanity, due to marihuana, is practically unknown in the United States and in so far as reports go the same may be said for Mexico where the drug is widely used. I should mention for comparison here that opium does not cause people to become insane as does alcohol and marihuana. Marihuana causes a very definite intoxication in which the patient has peculiar sensations and perceptions. For instance, he may feel that his arms are twice as long as they actually are; that his head is much larger than it is; and it may seem to him that four or five minutes has actually been an hour. It does not follow from this that every person who takes marihuana would have these sensations and feelings every time he takes it; in fact the drug may be taken in moderation as may alcohol without producing symptoms noticeable to others.

Psychopathic and criminally inclined people may under the influence of marihuana commit crimes. In this respect it resembles alcohol and differs from opium. The opium addict who commits a crime is usually a thief who steals in order to get the wherewithal to buy the opium necessary to satisfy his physical needs and of course the opium addict is usually an unstable individual. The few really desperate criminals among them are criminals regardless of the opium. The same would apply to desperate marihuana criminals but with this difference - some unstable border-line persons who would not commit a crime normally may be led to commit a crime under the influence of marihuana. No one need fear that a normal individual who happens to smoke a few marihuana cigarettes is going to commit a crime because of the intoxication produced.

It is said that marihuana stimulates the sex impulse and that persons under its influence are likely to commit sex crimes. The reports in the lay press about this are of course greatly exaggerated, but the same applies to sex that I have said about other types of crimes. I would say in relation to crime that the number of crimes produced by persons under the influence of marihuana is infinitesimal as compared with those produced by persons intoxicated with alcohol. This is not because alcohol has greater crime-producing qualities but because its use is so much more wide spread.

As to treatment of marihuana addiction, the only immediate treatment necessary is to take the drug away from the patient. There is no suffering. The other treatment is the same as the treatment for opium addicts - namely, the treatment of the psychopathic tendencies that some of these people have, but opium addicts are likely to be more psychopathic, not because opium makes them so but because the penalties for handling opium have been so great that practically all the normal people have been cured. Therefore, we may expect fewer relapses in the cases of marihuana addicts than in opium addicts because more normal people are likely to have been taking the drug. Now that the law regarding marihuana is becoming severe this difference will disappear and a confirmed relapsing marihuana addict will also be difficult to cure permanently because of his innate psychopathic disposition.

It is probable that if marihuana addiction became wide spread that many psychopathic and unstable marihuana addicts would become opium addicts just as many alcohol addicts and cocaine addicts become opium addicts. Alcohol, cocaine and marihuana give what is felt by the patient as stimulation, and especially marihuana gives bizarre sensations which are at least momentarily interesting. But people who use these drugs excessively are really seeking peace and calm and opium is the drug that gives this. This is why so many of them go over to opium, and this is probably why opium addicts will always be somewhat more difficult to cure.

In the American Journal of Psychiatry for September, 1934, Dr. Walter Bromberg, Senior Psychiatrist, Bellevue Hospital, and Psychiatrist to the Court of General Sessions, New York, has an article on marihuana intoxication that is without propaganda and which in my opinion is the best article on the subject that has been written in recent years. He studied the criminal aspects of it and found that of 2,216 criminals convicted of felonies in New York from 1932 to 1933, not one of confirmed marihuana addiction was noted. This article would well repay reading but if you read it believe what Dr. Bromberg says and be careful not to confound what he says with what he reports from other people; for instance, he reports that the Public Prosecutor in New Orleans in 1930 found that of 450 prisoners during 1930, 135 were marihuana addicts, and that slightly less than half of the murderers and about 20 per cent of the larceny cases, and about 18 per cent of the assault and robbery cases were addicts. The inference is that the Prosecutor thinks these people committed crimes because of their addiction but from my general knowledge of the subject and of the way people have of getting one thing on their minds and ignoring everything else, I greatly doubt whether more than two or three per cent of the crimes were committed because of the addiction. Although I do not doubt that the New Orleans cases had taken marihuana off and on, I do doubt the relation of the marihuana to the crimes.

I am reminded here of the book I recently reviewed. It was written by a former morphine addict who was cured of his morphine addiction and felt the urge to do some crusading about the evil of addiction. He decided because of the publicity given about marihuana to try out the effects of this drug. He got together six other men who, like himself, were heavy drinkers, and went out on a party. They provided themselves with eight quarts of gin, four bottles of absinthe, and eight marihuana cigarettes. They drank up the gin and absinthe and each of them smoked a marihuana cigarette. Of course a number of things happened and it was all attributed to the marihuana.

In conclusion, marihuana is a harmful drug that would do much harm if its use became wide spread but there is no danger that its use will become very wide spread among normal people and it will not grip the psychopaths as opium does because it does not create the physical craving characteristic in opium addicts. The abuse of the drug should be prevented but in preventing its abuse I think we should be careful not to ruin the lives of persons who happen to have taken it for a short time. I am thinking of the six cases that were recently sent here from Puerto Rico. Three of them had no criminal records whatever. One of these was given four years and the other two were given five years. Such sentences can do no good and they are bound to do harm. If patients like this were given a year and a day the punishment would act

as a deterrent, they would be completely cured during the nine months that they would stay here, and unless they happen to be very unstable and psychopathic individuals it is extremely unlikely that they would revert to the use of marihuana or any other narcotic. I also think that the five years given to the other three patients who came here in the same group is too much in so far as the cure of their addiction is concerned. However, each of these patients had had jail sentences before and presumably are somewhat unstable. Forced confinement for a long period will not do them the same harm that it will do the other three patients simply because they are probably already rather too hardened and experienced in anti-social methods or practices to suffer to the same degree as the others.

I am bringing this up merely to give you our idea about the rehabilitation of addicts and especially to emphasize that some may be harmed by harsh treatment and too long confinement. We feel here, and our ideas are based on experience with addicts, that the curable addict can be cured in a year and that many psychopathic addicts will not be permanently cured with longer treatment. This is not because of anything that the drug has done to them but because being psychopathic and unstable they are looking for relief or the thrill that they get beyond the relief or thrill that the drug produces in any normal person. Because of this they, regardless of consequences, often go back to the drug that will produce the relief or thrill that they are looking for.

Very truly yours,

Lawrence Kolb,  
Medical Director,  
Medical Officer in Charge.

LK:gp