



# HIGH-LIGHT



ALCOHOL AND DRUG NEWS BRIEF FOR EMPLOYERS

NOVEMBER 2002

## RAMOT AND STEPPING STONES ON THE PHYSICAL/PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF DAGGA AND DECRIMINILIZATION

In this edition of HIGH-LIGHT we talk to the heads of 2 established treatment centers in and around Cape Town. In the debate about the decriminalization of dagga, claims about the presumed dangers and medicinal properties of the weed continue to be shrouded in controversy. A major complicating factor in such a discussion is the fact that Dagga is more than often used together with Mandrax. But what are the views of those professionals who manage the in-patient treatment of those who develop serious problems with these drugs.

We spoke the Rev **Petrus Theron of RAMOT** in Parow and Mr **Peter Powis from Stepping Stones** in Kommetjie and this is what they had to say about the effects of Dagga and Mandrax use and the question of decriminalization of Dagga :

**High-light** : “ *In your clinical experience, what are the most common psychological problems which Dagga and Mandrax patients present with upon admission ?*”

**Ramot** : The psychological problems associated with the abuse of Dagga/Mandrax do not differ markedly from the abuse of other drugs. Dagga/Mandrax, like other drugs, ultimately destroys all traces of self-respect, self-confidence and any remaining psychological abilities to lead a normal and productive life. Users seem to lack the ability to form mutually satisfying interpersonal relations and deal with their interpersonal worlds in an assertive but non-aggressive manner. We rarely encounter a Dagga/Mandrax patient upon admission who does not experience symptoms of depression (including apathy, lethargy, indifference, lack of motivation), anxiety, irritability, aggression and a general feeling of utter despondency about themselves and their life situation. Our Dagga/Mandrax patients also appear to be suspicious even to the point of being deluded with paranoid ideation.

**Stepping Stones** : Emotional numbness, denial of the consequences of using, blaming of others, resentment and low self-esteem are some of the most common psychological problems.

**High-light** : “*Are there specific medical problems amongst Dagga/ Mandrax patients which could be*

*attributed directly to their drug usage ?*”

**Ramot** : In comparison with e.g. alcohol patients, our Dagga/Mandrax patients appear to be in fairly good health. It should be remembered though that dagga is highly irritating to the throat and has adverse effects on the lungs - it is even more carcinogenic than tobacco. Problems associated with the respiratory system such as a chronic cough occur in heavy users. The long term use of dagga may result in emphysema, chronic bronchitis, sinusitis and depresses the immune system's ability to protect itself against invading bacteria, viruses, chemicals, etc. leaving the person susceptible to illness.

**Stepping Stones** : We find that long term Dagga/Mandrax smokers may suffer from ( reversible) lung damage

**High-light** : “ *The decriminalization of dagga has often been in the news lately. How do you feel about decriminalization if we define the term as the lawful use and/or possession of a given amount of Dagga by persons older than 18 ?*”

**Ramot** : Decriminalization of dagga defined as such will not solve the problems created by the use and abuse thereof. I think society needs to communicate strongly and convincingly the conviction that there is no scientific or any other evidence that this drug will give rise to a better world nor that it has a constructive function in society. On the other hand, the possession of dagga does not necessarily imply that a person is a criminal per se. So it remains a controversial issue which needs to be debated further.

**Stepping Stones** : We recognize that there are compelling arguments both for and against the decriminalization of cannabis. While we acknowledge that cannabis has scientifically proven therapeutic properties, we also confirm that cannabis abuse and dependence are real concerns. Many regular users experience health problems, loss of motivation and deterioration in academic/work performance as a result of their dagga use and find it difficult to stop using.

We are strongly opposed to the criminalisation of dagga users as this retrenches the marginalisation of drug dependant people, compromises the users access to treatment and may even increase the likelihood of further drug abuse in incarceration ensues

We advocate that any policy around and regarding dagga should encourage users to seek help by :

- Decriminalizing users
- Educating employers to support employees efforts at recovery without jeopardizing their jobs
- Encouraging all schools to have an effective drug policy, which includes both opportunities for assistance to drug using pupils ( rather than focusing on disciplinary measures) and life skills and drug prevention programmes
- Motivating medical aids to cover the costs of the treatment for drug dependence

Any policy should also include the State developing and supporting accessible, appropriate and accredited treatment programmes.

**High-light** : “ Which percentage of your patients are employer referrals ? What has been your experience regarding cooperation from employers thus far ? “

**Ramot** : Fifteen percent.. Our experience with employers vary from company to company. Some managers are very understanding and sympathetic but others do not establish contact with their employee during the treatment period! A simple phone call seems to have a positive and motivating influence on the employee.

**Stepping Stones** : About twenty percent. Usually the cooperation of employers is excellent. They are willing to come in for sessions and attend family programmes, etc.

**High-light** : “ Do you have a special message for employers regarding employee substance abuse ?”

**Ramot** : Please keep in mind that we are all vulnerable to fall prey to substance addiction though not all abusers become addicts. Given the extent of alcohol abuse in society we are perhaps just lucky to have escaped the trap of addiction until now. And then we have not even mentioned addiction to cigarettes. In conclusion, addiction is a chronic relapsing disease for which no final and permanent cure exists. Recovering addicts therefore need our full support to live a normal life. Employers could assist recovering addicts by ensuring that a culture that enhances and sanctions abuse does not exist e.g. at work parties by making soft drinks more readily available than alcohol. The use of alcohol may precipitate a relapse in dagga/ Mandrax patients.

**Stepping Stones** : Face it, develop a policy to address it , be firm but also recognize that it is often an illness for which the employee needs help. If the employee refuses help or refuses to use the help “in action” , then tough measures need to be instituted. Supervisors need to be trained to identify the problem and act appropriately.

**Summary** : These insights indicate that in dagga dependant patients at these centers, psychological problems feature more prominently than physical ones with impaired inter personal relationships, anxiety , irritability and depression and general feelings of inadequacy being more common. As far as physical health are concerned, it appears to be the irritant effect of chronic smoking on the respiratory system resulting in chronic cough and infections which is most frequently encountered.

On the issue of decriminalization the response from these centers echoes the general uncertainty and controversy surrounding the issue. Whilst Ramot is unequivocally opposed to the notion, Stepping Stones acknowledges that there may be arguments in favoring decriminalization – this center however also acknowledges that dagga use has a particular negative effect on some vulnerable groups. Both centers appear to oppose the criminalization of users.

With between 15-20% of referrals to these centers being employer initiated, they clearly have a stake in how the problem is managed on shopfloor level. Firm but supportive intervention coupled with a sensitivity towards the company culture towards social drinking are perhaps particularly relevant on the eve of the festive season.

**Ramot** is a well established, registered inpatient treatment center in Parow which offers an intensive 5 week programme for alcohol /drug dependency. For more information , please contact Rev Theron at 9392033

**Stepping Stones** is a private facility in Kommetjie which offers treatment for a range of disorders including substance abuse , gambling and eating disorders. For more information, please contact Peter at 7834230

We wish to extend our warmest Christmas wishes to our clients who have so staunchly supported us during the year. A joyous and blessed Christmas coupled with a well deserved rest and a prosperous 2003.