

Clarke urged to focus on mental health risks of cannabis

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Rethink today (January 4) urged Home Secretary Charles Clarke to focus on the mental health risks of cannabis rather than fiddle with its legal status.

The Home Secretary is expected shortly to announce his response to recommendations from the Advisory Council on the Mis-use of Drugs latest review of cannabis.

The review was announced in March 2005, a year after cannabis was downgraded from a Class B to a Class C drug, in response to new international research showing an increased risk of cannabis users developing schizophrenia.

The advisory council can call for a return of cannabis to a Class B status, but it can also urge the Home Secretary to take more effective action to raise public understanding of the risks.

Rethink has now written to the Home Secretary urging him to:

- Devote resources to measures that can work to reduce risk, rather than changing the classification of cannabis.
- Develop a long-term awareness and information campaign targeted particularly at young people, long-term users of cannabis and those people with a family history of severe mental illness. We believe that such a campaign should be led by the Department of Health, rather than the Home Office.
- Sponsor and support new research into the relationship between severe mental illness and cannabis and the most effective ways of reducing use.
- Develop policies to deal specifically with dealing in cannabis around mental health facilities, similar to those for dealing around schools.

Rethink chief executive Cliff Prior said: "There is a concern that the real risks posed to mental health by cannabis use will translate into a knee-jerk reaction from the Home Office to stiffen penalties.

We reject that approach, which will only lead to further confusion amongst high-risk groups and could lead to thousands of people being dragged through the courts rather than supported through health and social care.

We want to see Mr Clarke reacting imaginatively by handing responsibility for a huge public information campaign to the Department of Health whilst facing down siren calls to further criminalise users.

We want stiffer penalties for the dealers who prey on people with mental health problems in and around hospitals and community facilities. "

For more information and to read Rethink's letter to the Home Secretary go to

Source: www.rethink.org

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