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1 High time to decide

2 The October 2020 '[reeferendum](#)' will determine the legal status of recreational cannabis in New  
3 Zealand. Amidst the many arguments for and against, a key issue has yet to receive adequate debate  
4 and critical scrutiny. Cannabis-induced psychosis warrants concern because of the profound and  
5 sometimes irreversible social and occupational disability that can result. Epidemiological data from  
6 New Zealand<sup>1</sup> and elsewhere<sup>2,3</sup> strongly implicate a causal role for tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in  
7 schizophrenia. Additional concern arises from the impacts of regular cannabis use on a critical period  
8 of brain maturation during adolescence up to the age of 25 or so.<sup>4</sup>

9 These problems are exacerbated by commercial pressure, regardless of legal status, for producers to  
10 develop strains of cannabis with ever higher THC content. Urban myths notwithstanding, THC drives  
11 recreational use as well as reported symptom relief and side-effects of 'medicinal' cannabis.<sup>5</sup>  
12 Another cannabis constituent, cannabidiol (CBD), may mitigate the psychogenicity of THC,<sup>6</sup> but the  
13 notion that sufficiently high levels of the former relative to the latter could be legally mandated  
14 must be regarded as little more than a pipe dream.<sup>7</sup>

15 If recreational cannabis were to be legalised in NZ, based on overseas experience we can expect  
16 rapid commercialisation, increased use in the adult and adolescent populations, followed by an  
17 elevated incidence of psychosis.<sup>3</sup> A proper health-economic study will be required to reckon the  
18 consequent social and economic costs and, ideally, to counterbalance these against anticipated gains  
19 from legalisation on reduced gang activity, prosecution, and incarceration.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, there  
20 is evidence that decriminalisation<sup>9</sup> offers a useful compromise between the extremes of legalisation  
21 and criminalisation; its relevance as an alternative in NZ has been cogently argued.<sup>10</sup>

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