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Army Study of Marihuana Smokers Points to Better Ways of Treatment

"You get hot and you feel that you're going to freeze. You like to go to one of those freaky dens where you can look at bodies sprawled out. You want to listen to the frantic tom-tom of the Duke . . ."

The soldier's face wore an ecstatic expression. In a low, dreamy whisper, he continued: "The Army's all right as long as I keep my stuff on hand. I can't live without it."

Doctors diagnosed the case as drug addiction (Cannabis sativa, or marihuana) and confined the man to the Army Air Forces Regional Station Hospital, March Field, Calif. There he became one of a group of 35 confirmed marihuana smokers, subjects of an intensive seven-month Army medical study. This was probably the first intimate scientific investigation, either of a civilian or military nature, of the cause and treatment of this little-understood habit.

Last week in the magazine War Medicine, two of the hospital's psychiatrists, Capt. Eli Marcovitz and Capt. Henry J. Myers, made their first official report on the experiment. It added up to the fact that marihuana smoking, a notoriously troublesome civilian problem,* becomes even more serious when combined with military service. "In effect," the doctors reported, "the soldiers felt and acted like enemy aliens toward society."

The Reefer Men: Of the experimental group 34 were Negroes and one was white. They were referred to the hospital's neuropsychiatric service because of (1) chronic physical complaints, chiefly headaches; (2) intoxication, with uncontrolled behavior or a state of near-stupor; (3) open demands to superior officers that they be given passes to go out for marihuana; (4) violence or self-mutilating action (mainly wrist-slashing) in the guard house.

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*Rough estimates say there are 100,000 addicts in the United States, mainly high-school students, Negro and white jazz musicians, Harlem habitués, and criminals.

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1944 Cannabis Study

As a group, the soldiers had civilian histories packed with adverse family, social, and economic factors. Only five had graduated from high school. For 24 there were records of arrests and sentences to reform schools and jails. The offenses ranged from assault to burglary, drunkeness, vagrancy, and carrying concealed weapons.

Of 32 subjects seventeen were single and fifteen married. Ten of the fifteen married men were either separated or divorced. In most cases, sexual activity began as early as 13 or 14 years.

Many of the soldiers had never worked at all. Some were supported by their women friends and some by gambling or drug peddling. One had had twenty jobs in three years. Another, who had never held a job longer than a month, said: "I ain't for working."

The Marihuana Personality: Unlike alcoholics, these marihuana users showed no sense of guilt or remorse. They were indifferent to opinion, and they frequently tried to persuade the doctors that they and other "squares" (non-users) ought to try marihuana because they were missing "the greatest thing in life."

A great many of them attempted to form a compensatory image of themselves as superior people. "I could be a general like MacArthur," one asserted. "He looks smooth—like he's high all the time."

Toward women their attitude combined indifference with extreme promiscuity. Most of them said they would take marihuana instead of girls if they had to make a choice. On the other hand, some spoke glowingly of the "reefer pads" (marihuana dens) and the "freakish women" there—women who, with or without drugs, were uninhibited sexually. Some said frankly that marihuana increased their feeling of sexual potency. "After you smoke it," said one, "you feel that no woman can resist you."

In civilian life the men were unable to stand frustration, deprivation, or authority. Their response to such situations was "explosive aggression." Even though some began their Army service with attempts to be good soldiers, the old patterns reasserted themselves. Either their "smoking" increased or they ran into trouble with their superiors.

Bad Soldiers: In addition to inadequate performance, there was the prob-

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lem of discipline in the marihuana group. Many could not stand being reprimanded.

Commanding officers' reports included these quotes: "A potentially dangerous man, under constant observation for untoward behavior." "It is difficult to assign him to a duty which he will fulfill without continued prodding."

The Way Out: In the hospital these men revealed "the usual behavior of the outlaw who rejects and rebels against the authority from which he really wants love and of which he longs to be a part."

After a few weeks of sedatives, certain freedoms, and sympathetic encouragement, "hostility diminished and they showed evidence of better rapport." They were still not able or willing to do any useful work in the wards. But there was sufficient change in their attitude to make it seem reasonable that a patient, long-term therapeutic program carried out under favorable conditions might help to rehabilitate the majority of the group.

How to deal with this problem stumped Army officials. Only rarely does a marihuana addict develop a chronic psychotic state calling for medical discharge. Only a few behave so aggressively that they are court-martialed and sentenced to long confinement where a rehabilitation program might have good effect.

Because the marihuana smokers interfere with Army efficiency, separation from the service eventually becomes necessary. But this solution, according to the March Field doctors, "merely releases the addict to civilian life where he can continue to have his difficulties. Also, he tends to foster the use of marihuana by others."

Instead of discharge the officers conducting the March Field survey recommended the creation of special government institutions to which these men can be committed. "Such therapy must include not only psychotherapy," they concluded, "but the provision of a social situation, a community in which the individual is given the opportunity to take his place as a productive normal member of society. Only after succeeding in such a situation should he be discharged from custody."

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