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Getting high at your own risk

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The dialogue on legalising cannabis has taken centre stage in the Sri Lankan and global context as it has been portrayed as an income-generating enterprise. However, medical experts claim that this is another attempt by tobacco companies to promote its use among the masses, particularly the youth, in the guise of a 'medicinal drug'.

During a recent discussion, Consultant Psychiatrist at Colombo South Teaching Hospital, Kalubowila Dr. Jayamal De Silva shed light on the link between cannabis use and psychiatric issues. "There's an increase in the number of people with psychiatric issues and this could be seen if you visit the mental hospital at IDH today. Cannabis is an addictive substance, similar to alcohol and after some time people become greedy for it. Many users who have used cannabis for a long time don't seem to have a control on themselves; they become preoccupied and are in most instances trying to find the next dose. Eventually their life centres around cannabis and they become intoxicated." explained Dr. De Silva.

He observes short-term memory loss in youth and impacts on cognitive abilities. "They feel that a minute takes longer to pass, they hear sounds and appear to be in a trance state. Parents complain that they become violent after smoking cannabis. Once you smoke cannabis your heart starts beating fast, you become intoxicated and you feel thirsty and hungry," said Dr. De Silva.

He further said that cannabis has the tendency to affect developing, especially children, adolescents and young adults up to 25 years of age. "A 15-year study done in Sweden back in 1987 drew links to cannabis and schizophrenia. This study found that 21 cases out of a sample of 752 individuals who smoked cannabis more than 50 times, suffered from schizophrenia." he said.

Some other health issues caused by cannabis are as follows :

- Anxiety
- Panic attacks
 - Manic episodes
- Erectile dysfunction
 - Lung damage

Dr. De Silva further stressed on the link between cannabis use and erectile dysfunction while referring to a study published on the American Journal of Men's Health. A popular notion is that cannabis is used in native medicinal recipes and therefore it should be legalised for use. "But native practitioners who use cannabis claim that they use it after detoxifying with ghee. In fact it's never smoked or used as a recreational drug. It's used as one of the ingredients and in smaller quantities and can only be found in around 100 recipes out of 50,000 other medicinal recipes found in native practice," he said.

Dr. De Silva also claimed that the tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) levels in locally grown cannabis plants is much more higher today. A Finnish drug report released in 2017 proved how 13.5% of

youth between 15-34 years of age had been using cannabis. This happens in a country that has one of the best education systems in the world. Many other studies have shown how the legalization of cannabis could have dangerous repercussions on youth. However, they say that smoking cannabis improves creativity and it makes people more intelligent. Therefore it is clear that these groups have various ways and means of promoting the drug and the most vulnerable segment is the youth," he said in conclusion.