

WORLD

Canada urges teenagers to say no to marijuana

THORNBURY, ONTARIO

Legalization raises concern about the effects of the drug on the growing brain

BY CATHERINE PORTER

Parents and grandparents jammed the small hall of Thornbury, a sleepy ski town north of Toronto, to glean tips on how to talk to their teenagers about the potential harms of marijuana.

Held less than a week before Canada was set to legalize cannabis, the public health session had a message for parents: Marijuana would be legal for adults, but it was not safe for young people.

And parents needed to instill in their children the idea that pot could be dangerous.

"It's been proven the brain doesn't stop growing until you are 25, and yet we're legally selling it to people at 19," Jenny Hanley, an addictions counselor, said as she left the meeting. "What the hell is our government thinking?"

Canada last month became the second country to make it legal for adults to buy, grow and consume small amounts of marijuana. But it also made it a crime to give it to anyone younger than 19 or 18, depending on the province, and set a penalty of up to 14 years in prison for doing so.

At the same time, the government began an \$83 million public education campaign, much of it aimed at Canadian youths, that warns of pot's dangers.

But persuading teenagers not to see legalization as a green light to use marijuana will be difficult, experts say, not to mention that past antidrug efforts have offered little evidence of success.

And when it comes to marijuana and the teenage brain, the science is far from clear.

Officials had argued that regulating the cannabis market, and cracking down on illegal sellers, would reduce its soaring use among Canadian teenagers, who, according to a 2013 Unicef report, already use it more than young people anywhere else in the world.

"The most disingenuous element of legalization is that it will keep it out of the hands of children," said Dr. Benedikt Fischer, a senior scientist at the Center for Addiction and Mental Health in To-



Jenny Hanley with 19-year-old Jared Kaye at the Hanley family farm in Flesherton, Ontario. Mr. Kaye and another teenage addict live at the Hanley home.

ronto. "It is a big experiment, in many ways."

Still, officials are optimistic. "A lot of young people have the notion this is a very benign substance of no risk — it's organic, it's natural and it's medicine," said Bill Blair, the country's minister in charge of marijuana legalization, and formerly the Toronto police chief.

"When you start giving people the facts to replace the mythology and misinformation, people make smarter and better decisions," he added.

But, as parents are discovering, sifting through the science and guiding their teenagers is tricky.

Lounging on a bench at the back of the Thornbury session was Jared Kaye. He smoked marijuana for the first time at age 9 while also bingeing on alcohol, and then added harder drugs. He started rehab at 15 and became homeless.

He and another teenage addict were taken in by Ms. Hanley to live in her home near Flesherton, Ontario.

"I hurt my family a lot," said Mr. Kaye, now 19. "I did nothing but hurt myself."

Paul Thompson, a businessman from Stratford who attended the session while in town on vacation, sees marijuana as less dangerous.

When his 21-year-old son was ar-

rested a couple of years ago on marijuana charges, Mr. Thompson decided to provide him with marijuana himself, to ensure it was not laced with other drugs.

"I think alcohol causes far greater harms," said Mr. Thompson, a divorced father of three. "I don't believe cannabis is addictive. People who are addicted have deeper problems."

The confounding thing is that both men were correct.

Studies have shown that marijuana use in adolescents can impair brain function for some time after the cannabis has left their bodies, and a concern raised by some experts is that

many adolescents use cannabis to self-medicate for anxiety or depression.

Most scientists agree the risk to young brains is greatest for those who start smoking at age 12 or younger, smoke regularly and choose high-potency marijuana. Smoking is also dangerous for young people with family histories of serious mental illness, like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder.

For young people who start lightly experimenting with the drug at a later age, the risks of long-term damage to their growing brains are reduced.

"It's a reasonable statement to say it could have impact on the developing

brain," said Matthew Hill, a neuroscientist with the University of Calgary who has studied cannabinoids for 18 years. "That's not the same thing as saying it definitively will."

"The evidence is not as consistent and compelling as some people like to spin it," he added.

While some studies found that regular cannabis use by adolescents changed brain structure and long-term cognitive functioning, follow-up studies disputed those findings and concluded that alcohol use, cigarette smoking and family background were the main drivers in I.Q. reduction. A recent analysis of 69 studies on young, frequent cannabis users, published in *JAMA Psychiatry*, found that the negative effects on cognitive functioning dissipated after 72 drug-free hours.

"Cannabis is correlated with lots of things," said James MacKillop, the co-director of McMaster University's medicinal cannabis research center in Hamilton. "Teasing out whether it's causally related is a much more complicated thing."

"If you are using cannabis when you are 12 or 13, then there are probably lots of other things going on," he continued. "There might be poor parental oversight, more early life stress or family disorganization."

To make matters more confusing, there are no certain strategies to stop young people from trying cannabis.

Some public health units have adopted a harm-reduction strategy, urging teenagers to take more "cannabis-free" days and not drive stoned. Others are preaching abstinence.

"Because it's legal, it's not safe," said Dr. Paul Roumeliotis, the medical officer of health for Eastern Ontario. "That's our real message."

With all the discussion about cannabis in Canada as legalization day approached, many parents were alarmed to discover how acceptable it had become among the country's youths. According to a recent census bureau report, 32.7 percent of teenagers had smoked marijuana in the previous three months, for example.

Mr. Kaye said he thought parents should take an individual approach. His advice seemed more like a guide for parents than a drug-prevention plan.

"Be open with your kids," he said. "Try to have a close relationship so they are comfortable telling you what they tried and what their friends are doing."

Saudis talked of hiring killers

SAUDIS, FROM PAGE 1

into Mr. Mueller's broader inquiry. In 2016, a company owned by Mr. Zamel, Psy-Group, had pitched the Trump campaign on a social media manipulation plan.

A spokesman for the Saudi government declined to comment, as did lawyers for both Mr. Nader and Mr. Zamel.

During the March 2017 meeting about the plan to sabotage Iran's economy, according to the three people familiar with the discussions, the Saudis asked the businessmen whether they also "conducted kinetics" — lethal operations — saying they were interested in killing senior Iranian officials. The businessmen hesitated, saying they would need to consult their lawyer.

The lawyer flatly rejected the plan, and the businessmen told the Saudis they would not take part in any assassinations. Mr. Nader told the Saudis about a London-based company run by former British special operations troops that might take on the contract. It is unclear which company he suggested.

Before he was ousted last month, General Assiri was considered one of Prince Mohammed's closest advisers, a man whose sharp ascent tracked the rise of the young crown prince. In 2016, he became the public face of Saudi Arabia's campaign in Yemen, giving briefings about the state of the war. He traveled frequently to Washington, where Saudi-paid lobbyists brought him to think tanks to give optimistic assessments about the campaign's progress and he extolled the Saudi concern for the welfare of civilians.

By 2017, however, the Saudi campaign that General Assiri oversaw in Yemen had ground into a military stalemate and, despite his assurances, a humanitarian catastrophe. But his patron, Prince Mohammed, also consolidated his power over all of the kingdom's security apparatuses, and he promoted General Assiri to the deputy head of the kingdom's spy agency, the General Intelligence Directorate.

Western analysts believe that Prince Mohammed moved General Assiri there in part to keep an eye on the spy chief, Khalid bin Ali bin Abdullah al-Humaidan, known as Abu Ali, who was close to Western intelligence agencies and suspected of harboring loyalties to one of the crown prince's royal rivals.

General Assiri was dismissed last month when the Saudi government acknowledged Mr. Khashoggi's killing and said he had organized the operation. On Saturday, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey said his government had handed over a recording of Mr. Khashoggi's killing to the United States, Saudi Arabia, Britain and France, pressuring President Trump to more harshly punish the Saudis over the murder.

The plan by Mr. Nader and Mr. Zamel



Maj. Gen. Ahmed al-Assiri of Saudi Arabia attended a meeting in 2017 at which Saudi officials inquired about killing Qasem Soleimani, a top military official in Iran.

dates to the beginning of 2016, when they started discussing an ambitious campaign of economic warfare against Iran similar to one waged by Israel and the United States during the past decade aimed at coercing Iran to end its nuclear program. They sketched out operations like revealing hidden global assets of the Quds Force; creating fake social media accounts in Farsi to foment unrest in Iran; financing Iranian opposition groups; and publicizing accusations, real or fictitious, against senior Iranian officials to turn them against one another.

Mr. Nader is an adviser to the crown prince of the United Arab Emirates, a country that, along with Saudi Arabia and Israel, has identified Iran as the primary threat to stability in the Middle East.

Both he and Mr. Zamel believed that Hillary Clinton's anticipated victory in the 2016 election meant a continuation of the Iran nuclear deal signed by President Barack Obama — and little appetite in Washington for a concerted campaign to cripple the Iranian economy. So, they decided to pitch the plan to Saudi and Emirati officials, even submitting a proposal to General Assiri during a meeting in Belgium.

The election of Donald J. Trump changed their calculus, and shortly after, Mr. Nader and Mr. Zamel traveled to New York to sell both Trump transition officials and Saudi generals on their Iran plan.

Mr. Nader's initiative to try to topple the Iranian economy was first reported in May by *The New York Times*. His discussions in New York with General Assiri and other Saudi officials were reported last month by *The Daily Beast*.

Mr. Nader and Mr. Zamel enlisted Erik Prince, the former head of Blackwater and an adviser to the Trump tran-

sition team. They had already discussed elements of their plan with Mr. Prince, in a meeting when they learned of his own paramilitary proposals that he planned to try to sell to the Saudis.

A spokesman for Mr. Prince declined to comment.

In a suite on one of the top floors of the Mandarin Oriental hotel in New York, Mr. Zamel and Mr. Nader spoke to General Assiri and his aides about their Iran plan.

The Saudis were interested in the idea but said it was so provocative and potentially destabilizing that they wanted to get the approval of the incoming Trump administration before Saudi Arabia paid for the campaign.

After Mr. Trump was inaugurated in January 2017, Mr. Nader met frequently with White House officials to discuss the economic sabotage plan.

General Assiri's interest in assassinations was unsurprising but unrepresentative of official policy, said one Saudi familiar with the inquiry into the Khashoggi killing. The investigation has shown the general to be a grandiose and ambitious novice to intelligence who sought to impress the crown prince with unauthorized schemes for black operations, the person said.

But General Assiri's well-known closeness to the crown prince — the general often joined Prince Mohammed for meetings in Riyadh with visiting American officials — might make it difficult for the prince's supporters to distance him from the proposals, just as the same connections have helped convince Western intelligence agencies that the prince must have known about the plot against Mr. Khashoggi.

Mark Mazzetti reported from Washington, Ronen Bergman from Tel Aviv and David D. Kirkpatrick from London.

Accelerate your growth in Berlin

Germany's capital has got it all: the most influential political and economic decision makers, innovative companies and an unrivaled concentration of science and research. Berlin has great potential at its fingertips: Specialists and executives who are excellently trained and thrilled by the high quality of Berlin's urban life.

Check out our website with stories, portraits, facts & figures and find your reason why relocating your business to one of Europe's most thriving cities: Berlin.

www.reason-why.berlin



Berlin Partner
for Business and Technology

berlin Partner