



## **Convenience Advertising**



## **An examination of the first Dutch intergrated responsible cannabis server programme.**

David Stanley, Franz Trautmann.  
Convenience Advertising, Europe, Trimbo Institute of  
Mental Health and Addiction, Utrecht, The Netherlands



## Acknowledgements

This Dutch mass media drug information programme was funded by The Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sport, with additional support from the Prevention Fund.

The Trimbos Institute for Mental Health and Addiction, was commissioned to coordinate the programme which involved the following organisations:

- Leidsepleinbeheer BV,
- Jellinek Adviesburo Drugs;
- ResCon Research Consultancy; and,
- Convenience Advertising.

The core team of fieldworker's were:

- Henning Flatow,
- Jill McGeorge;
- Floortje Bruggeman;
- Ferdinand Smit;
- Liesbeth Vollemans;
- Harry Roggeveen, and David Stanley.

The programme was overseen and managed by:  
Franz Trautmann, Pieter Wetser and Anco De Jong.



## Introduction

This paper details the experience of producing a media program in the Netherlands about Cannabis use, within a public health framework. In it, the attitudes of policy makers towards drug classification, and drug use, are considered as key determinants of drug related harm management, with a particular emphasis, in the Dutch context, on the treatment of Cannabis in relation to the youth consumer market, and youth culture.

In 1972 the Baan Commission brought a clear-cut distinction between drug users and traffickers.<sup>1</sup>

The Commission found:

- a clear cut distinction between drug users and drug traffickers,
- a distinction between acceptable harm level drugs (cannabis products), and;
- identified drugs with an unacceptable harm level (opiates, psychostimulant and psychoactive drugs e.g.. heroin, amphetamine, cocaine).

This lead to a 'depenalisation' of cannabis (Lapp, M. 1994)<sup>2</sup>. By the late seventies the illicit drug market in the Netherlands split into two, and policy makers at regional and national level adopted varying degrees of tolerance towards cannabis, with the view that greater effort could be placed on reducing the harm from the unacceptable harm level illicit drugs (overdose, blood borne viruses, drug related nuisance, drug related crime).

By the early eighties youth were able to access cannabis in a controlled way within a safer context than before, from retail outlets styled as coffee shops. The policy is administered at local government level by a Triangle Committee which involves the Mayor, Chief of Police and the Chief Prosecutor (Lapp, M. 1997).<sup>3</sup>

The scale of use of cannabis in the Netherlands is such that every young person is confronted with hash or grass at one time or another, in their own environment<sup>4</sup>.

- 30% of young people over 14 years of age have tried smoking cannabis, and,
- 15% smoke it regularly.

---

<sup>1</sup>. Lapp, M. Dutch Drug Policy, personal communication, 1997. Amsterdam

<sup>2</sup>. *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup>. Bulldog Times (1985), Special Edition, Amsterdam.

<sup>4</sup>. Wetser, P. & de Jong, A. (1988) Mass-Media Campaign On Hash and Grass 1997, Concise Report, Utrecht.



The Drugs info Line at the Trimbos Institute receive calls from young people who have a lot of questions about cannabis. The combination of these factors justified a mass-media approach to the development of information about cannabis.

## Coffeeshops

It is estimated that there are between 1800 and 2200 coffee shops in the Netherlands. These enterprises obtain local government permits and follow specific guidelines which include:

- no more than 5 grams per customer per purchase day,
- no more than 500 grams of cannabis product can be held in an outlet (stock);
- absolutely no hard drugs;
- no aggressive behaviour;
- sale of teas, coffee, snack food;
- provision of health related information.

The coffeeshops are varied in atmosphere and clientele, each seeking a unique point of difference to sustain their enterprise. Some city areas have coffeeshops that target young tourists as well as local youth, and others establish a look and ambience reflecting part of the youth culture and/or sub-cultures. Examples of these forms of presentation include The Bulldog targeting English tourists, The Grass House targeting locals and visitors looking for a safe and quiet place where interesting and diverse people may meet for drinks and/or a wider range of quality cannabis products that are available.



**Figure 1:** A typical coffeeshop

The Grass House chain of venues offer an interesting ambience achieved with contemporary styled fit outs that include waterfalls, exotic sea shell clad walls and designer fittings.

Other venues offer on-line internet in a cyber cafe style, and others again are styled around contemporary youth music which includes metal, jazz (Blues Brothers), Reggae, pop, disco and rock. Other coffeeshops are styled in a general cafe presentation. Various forms of entertainment for clients include:

- video games,
- table football;
- pinball machines;
- fruit machines (gaming);
- pool tables;
- board games<sup>5</sup>.

18/08/97			special offer	
			1 gram	5 grams
marihuana sensimilla:			↓	↓
super skunk	14	68		
master kush	14	68		
hydro chronic	16	70		
haze no.2	16	76		
ok47	18	88		
import marihuana:				
thai	11	60		
hash:				
afghan/pakistan border	12	68		
mazari sharif (afghanistan)	35	168		
charas parvati (india)	28	118		
kashmir (india)	27	128		
temple (nepal)	17	80		
mustang (nepal)	28	118		
ketama (maroc)	8	38		
pollen/palm (maroc)	18	88		
gexmo (maroc)	24	110		
libanon	7	30		
hash joint	6			
marihuana joint	8			
reefer (without tobacco)	10			

Figure 2: An example of a Cannabis Menu

## The Programme

The programme is aimed primarily at young people aged 12 to 18 with a secondary audience of people aged 19-30. A previous campaign evaluation on cannabis use in 1996 found that young people appeared to take such substances for granted. The evaluation of this project found that almost 85% of respondents felt more information about drugs was necessary.

5. McGeorge, J. & Stanley, D. (1998) Safer Cannabis Use in the Netherlands, Convenience Advertising in Coffeeshops. Utrecht.

The programme developers, in targeting youth, carefully chose a communication style that would not alienate the target group by appearing parental, or authoritarian. It was felt the information must be seen as being delivered from their peers. In addition, it was recognised that while it was important to maintain a central theme [Inform yourself!], it was also necessary to use different approaches within various mediums. As such, a distinction was made between groups and approaches:

- in reaching youth in general, the primary goal was to stimulate information seeking behaviour,
- in reaching excessive young users, the aim was to find information that was useful and relevant to them, additionally to provide information about where to get assistance (service provider signposting)<sup>6</sup>.

It is acknowledged that these two groups do, to some degree, cross over.

In reaching this wide audience in a relevant and measurable way, several mediums were employed by the project steering committee:

### **Broadcasting (electronic or mass media)**

As has been stated, cannabis is integrated within Dutch society, occurring both in public social venues (coffeeshops) as well as within the confines of home. In seeking to reach young people in both urban and rural centres nationally, television and radio was used.

### **Narrowcasting (information and Education at locus of risk)**

It is necessary to place the campaign within the young person's social and physical culture. The coffeeshop is a place where a sub group of young people frequent and interact with one another within a chosen social setting, where social and peer dynamics can be influenced seeking to effect less harmful consumption<sup>7</sup>. This methodology integrates the intervention within the following groups:

- those youth who choose to use cannabis,
- their peers, and;
- those that service this group (venue management and staff).

---

<sup>6</sup> . Wetser, P & de Jong, A. (1997) *Hasj en Wiet: Wat weet je wel, wat weet je niet* Plan of the Mass Media Education Cannabis 1997.

<sup>7</sup> . van der Booman, T. & Trautmann, F. (1995) "Dutch Dickheads": the possibility of the use of fear in AIDS-prevention campaigns. 6th international Conference on the reduction of Drug Related Harm, Florence.

Those that use cannabis excessively often underestimate the health risks they take and are not in contact with organised providers of assistance and advice.

Placing information within coffeeshops is therefore an ideal way to integrate the communication items with the target audience in a culturally sensitive and relevant context - where cannabis is consumed and purchased<sup>8</sup>.

From a public health perspective, this style of narrowcasting messages is to, or within, the locus of risk.

This methodology can also support and provide further credibility to information given out by management/staff of coffee shops.

### **Why Convenience Advertising?**

Convenience Advertising (CA) specialises in narrowcasting to specific audiences with health and social education. With the use of A4 sized messages within a black frame, information is presented within the confines of the toilet area, on cubicle doors, above hand dryers and above urinals. By focusing and regularly maintaining placement within this private space, a 'captured' audience is ensured, which reduces the potential for 'third person' deflection of the communication (this message is not for me) and also reducing the ability of peers to influence the communication at uptake.

In addition, it allows the information to be delivered and absorbed within a gender specific context.

Over fifty evaluations across eight countries have found extremely high recall rates of communication messages delivered this way, with widespread support for receiving sensitive information within the private confines of the toilet.

In 1994 CA took part in a pilot HIV/AIDS campaign targeted to young people in the Netherlands. Developed by the project group 'AIDS and Drug Use' of the Netherlands Institute for Alcohol and Drugs (NIAD - now part of Trimbos Institute) in conjunction with Foundation Mainline (a drug user organisation), Rutgers Stichting (the national sexual health clinic) and CA. The programme messages consisted of colourful aspirational headlines such as "how to get rid of your debts in one go" contrasted with black humour images.

---

<sup>8</sup> . Blanken, P. & Tenholter, J. (1995), Convenience Advertising Als Medium voor AIDS-Preventie Onder Risico Jongeren, IVO Series 8, Rotterdam.







**Figure 3:** Convenience HIV/AIDS NIAD Message (1995)

In this case the image of a coffin/casket with a priest was presented in black and white with the tag line "AIDS, without a condom your a dickhead".

These messages were placed within the toilet areas of coffeeshops, bars and night-clubs in the city of Rotterdam.

The program sought to investigate whether the CA method offered possibilities in reaching 'risk taking youth', and to act as a reminder for the at risk youth on safer behaviours with relation to HIV/AIDS. A total of 63 venues participated and 280 members of the target group responded to the evaluation which found unprompted recall rates between 60% and 82%<sup>9</sup>.

## The CA Process And Placement Criteria

The Convenience Advertising component of the campaign was set out in three phases:

- the initial phase sought to visit coffeeshops (800) in order to select the most appropriate ones and assure their participation thorough contractual agreements. The criteria for venue inclusion in the programme included:
  - within a known group or cluster of coffeeshops,
  - any significant coffeeshops that were outside the known cluster or area of coffeeshops in any city/town;
  - priority to those coffeeshops with a younger clientele;
  - any coffeeshop that is situated near to a school;
  - any coffeeshop that also served alcohol;
  - those coffeeshops that attracted large clientele.

<sup>9</sup> . ibid 5

- phase two involved the placement of the educational materials (massage A) within coffeeshops in time for the general launch of the campaign on the 1st of October. The selected venue was contracted and CA gathered venue demographics which included:
  - age range of patrons,
  - gender weighting of patrons;
  - trading hours by each day of the week;
  - estimated number of patrons by day to arrive at weekly average;
  - establish if venue also served alcohol;
  - establish if venue served food (snack/light meal etc.);
  - gamer involvement in project evaluation;
  - venue owner/management/staff (key informant) opinion of intervention materials;
  - other information of a venue specific nature.
- phase three involved the replacement of poster A with a poster B to maintain interest and enthusiasm among the group. This visit was also used to gather feedback regarding the campaign and to deliver a ResCon questionnaire.

CA placed faux phone cards and bar stand or card holder as well as the 10 tip leaflet and its acrylic holder within the 575 participating venues.

The programme involved 575 participating venues where 1138 display points were established and maintained. The venue demographics collected identify an average estimated 469,070 patron visits to the participating venues weekly. The participating venues are spread across 35 cities/towns. Of the 575 participating venues, 241 also serve alcohol<sup>10</sup>.

Venue Demographics								
Venue Type	State	Reg No	Venue	Suburb	Gender	Age	Patronage Rate	DPT
			0008 Koffie en Dronen	Lokken	MbF	18-24	0 Week	2
								Collage town. Very busy late-nite bar, sales separate.
Subtotal for Venue Type: Coffeeshop/Bar							153545	241
Other								
	North		0164 Downtown Music	Leeuwarden	F.M	18-30+	500 Week	2
								Against 'coffeeshop' label, sells records - 'record store'; mainly technorave music, serves coffee
	West		0051 Koffie Verkeert	Rotterdam	MbF	18-30+	500 Week	2
								Art centre with music and exhibitions - smoking; meals, late-nite at Wends
Subtotal for Venue Type: Other							1000	4
Grand Totals for this report:							469070	1138

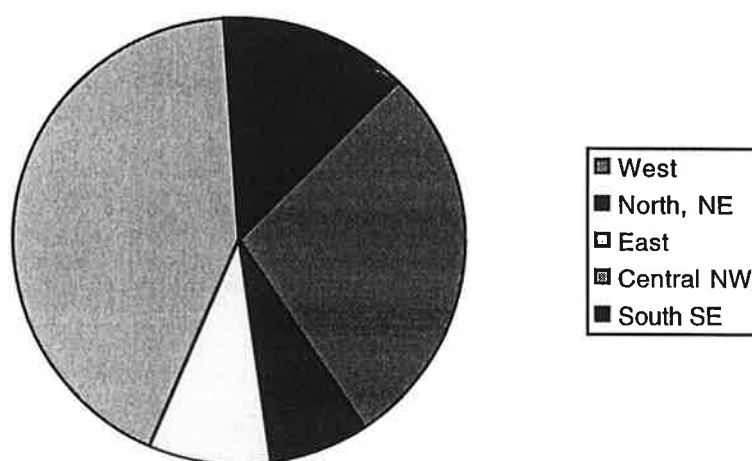
Figure 4: CA Venue Demographic Table

<sup>10</sup> . ibid 5.



City	No.	City	No.	City	No.
Alkmaar	4	Den Haag	67	Leeuwarden	18
Almelo	1	Den Helder	3	Leiden	8
Amersfoort	7	Dordrecht	9	Maastricht	21
Amsterdam	190	Ede	2	Nijmegen	10
Apeldoorn	8	Eindhoven	16	Rotterdam	78
Arnhem	13	Emmen	1	Scheveningen	3
Assen	2	Enschede	14	Tilburg	13
Breda	12	Groningen	9	Utrecht	18
Bussum	1	Haarlem	14	Venlo	4
Delft	5	Heerenveen	4	Zaandam	4
Delfzijl	3	Hengelo	2	Zwolle	5
Den Bosch	4	Hilversum	2	TOTAL	575

**Figure 6:** 35 towns and cities across the country participated in the programme.



**Figure 7:** Distribution of Venues by Region

There are a greater number of venues in those regions most densely populated:

- Central includes **Amsterdam** and **Utrecht**
- West includes **Rotterdam** and **Den Haag**
- The South includes **Maastricht**

## Messages - Fixed And Take Away: Combining Text, Graphics And Setting

The influence of peers in drug using behaviour is considerable, and cannot be underestimated. Cannabis use, like alcohol use, has its cultural rituals. It is a social activity, more often than not experienced in the company of friends and peers.

This programme's information and education component seeks to be objective about cannabis use, avoiding any notions of 'warnings' and taking the available health information and placing it within a non-judgmental and health beneficial context.

The communication design team achieved a balanced delivery of text which was not pitched above or beneath the audience - it presented potential outcomes based information on the level and type of behaviour (consumption). The educational materials developed for the coffeeshops included:

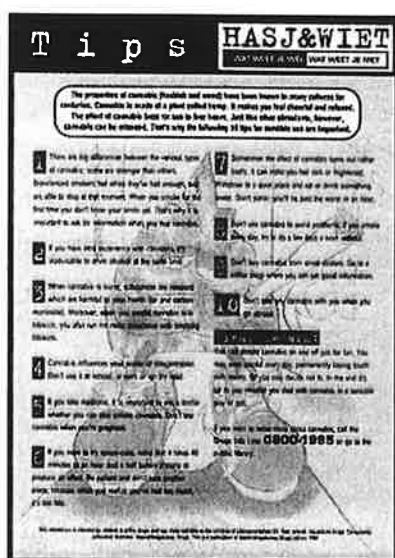


Figure 7: Cannabis Tip Card

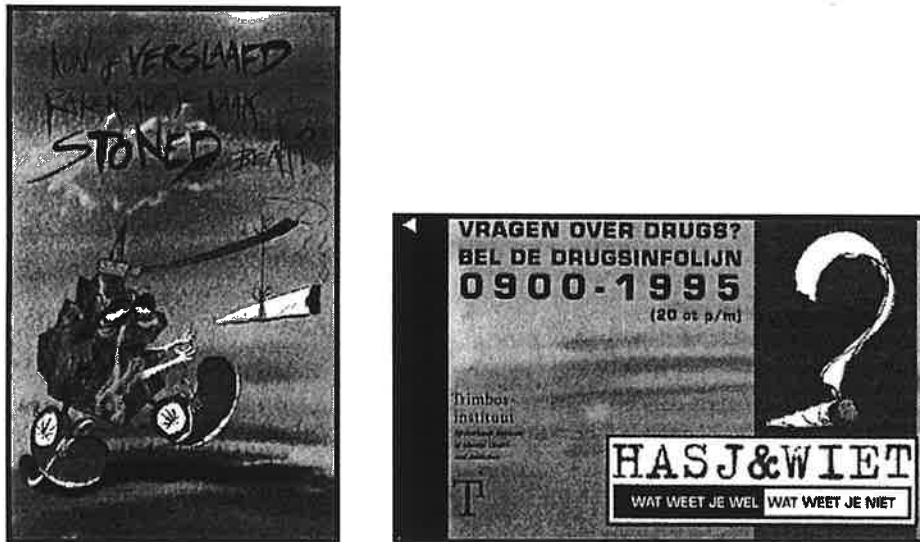
- 10 Tip cards - printed on one side in Dutch and the other in English, this yellow and black card presented tips for the safer use of cannabis, This allows the reader to understand the potential outcomes or range of outcomes and to digest the information in relation to their personal use patterns and context. An example of this is in the *Tips* sheet;

**" You can smoke cannabis on and off just for fun. You may even smoke every day, permanently losing touch with reality. Or you may decide not to. In the end it's up to you whether you deal with cannabis in a sensible way or not".**

Additionally, risk information was addressed in a frank and straight forward style which is appreciated by youth. As example of this is seen in Tip 5;

**"Cannabis influences your power of concentration.  
Don't use it at school, at work or on the road"**

The text and design team have paid attention to both the disadvantages of cannabis, and it's reported benefits; *"It makes you feel cheerful and relaxed"*. Disadvantages have been placed in a clear, factual and non-emotive context with regard to achieving a balance in the communication.



**Figure 9:** Faux Phone Card - Drug Info Line

- Faux phone cards - presented in a bright red stand, these small cards resembled phone cards and depicted the 'Stony' character. On the back is a questioning graphic, and the overall idea of the phone card is to advocate the Drugs info Line number.



Figure 10a: CA Bathroom Message "Problem"



Figure 10b: CA Bathroom Message "What do you know"

- A4 posters - two posters were designed and printed for display in black frames within the toilet areas of the coffeshops on a rotation basis, the message "Nu je hier toch...." was installed for the first three weeks of the programme and the second message van stoned zijn ga.... followed for the second three week period. Each message highlighted the secondary takeaway materials (Tips and faux phone card) on display at the coffeshop counter.

Generally young people have difficulty seeking information, in particular young males. They often feel they already know what there is to know, this knowledge can be derived from hearsay. The intervention materials seek to deliver information directly, in a non judgmental and visibly attractive way, and in stimulating discussion seeking to inform hearsay.

### The Servers: Coffeshop Owners/Managers/Employees

References to health risks do not appear to have a consistent place within this category of entertainment/leisure providers, with some being pro-active (Green House) and others inactive. With relation to the message content and the communication, most smiled or laughed when reading the CA messages, some would then show it to a colleague and or patrons. For 90% + of the venues these messages, and the continuum of communication items from the toilet signs (attention grabbing) to the take away items (10 Tips and faux phone card) with the holders was appreciated and the use of humour and surprise was commented on.

Most owner/managers looked at each item seriously, and generally accepted, and strongly endorsed, the programme - credibility was established with the content of the information, and the suitable level of humour to attract the attention to the take away items and the drugs info line number 0900-1995.

Most coffeeshop owners are prepared to take some responsibility in reducing the risk of negative outcomes from excessive use among their clients.

Visitors to coffeeshops can be divided into three groups:

- Take away buyers: 30% consider the shop a store, where they will make a purchase and leave,
- Brief stayers: 33% buy and stay to smoke a joint;
- Stayers: 36% consider the coffeeshop a meeting place where they can interact with friends and associates.

Considering the evaluation of the initial parent program and the identified need for more information among young users, coffeeshops are the best place to reach experimental and new initiates, committed and excessive young cannabis users while providing the added benefit of educating visitors in general.

## Outcomes

The programme was evaluated by Drs Inge de Weerd and Ruud Jonkers of ResCon Research, Haarlem Netherlands. In the evaluation report (February 1998) delivered to the Trimbos - instituut (Netherlands Institute of Mental Health and Addiction) 611 interviews were conducted with patrons. One hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed to coffeeshop managers/owners with 78 being filled out and returned to the evaluators - 52% response rate.

As stated earlier, the programme targeting young users was carried out in 600 coffeeshops. Posters in the toilets referred to the 10 tip flyer on the counter in every coffeeshop. The tip flyers were designed to help the user avoid problems with the use of hash and grass.

In addition, the faux telephone cards and holders were placed in each coffeeshop advocating the Drugs info Line.

ResCon found that of the coffeeshops approached by the Convenience Advertising team, only 1% indicated they were unwilling to take part.

ResCon found that:

- 180,000 10 tip flyers were distributed via the coffee shops,
- 115,000 Drugs Info Line cards were distributed from the coffeeshops;

- the survey among coffeeshop visitors found that 79% of them had looked at and taken part in that part of the programme targeting users;
- the majority were positive about the initiative with three quarters of them having read the flyer with tips, and the information being rated useful;
- coffeeshop owners were positive about the programme indicating a willingness to continue to distribute the materials. They saw the materials as particularly suitable for young users;
- 10,177 telephone calls were received by the Drugs info line in October. Most of the questions were related to the subject of hash and grass. The average monthly calls rate over the year was about 2000 calls a month.
- over half of the young people surveyed reported speaking to others (parents, friends and teachers) as a result of the programme.

Generally speaking the researchers deemed the programme successful and effective in terms of penetration. This they attributed to the challenging content on the one hand and the highly targeted distribution to the various target groups on the other.

## Lessons Learnt

Many city venues that had tourist clientele requested a message in English, French, Italian and Spanish that addressed the issues of space cake, alcohol and cannabis use together, and to use care when new to using cannabis.

Some coffeeshop owners saw the intervention as presenting themselves and their shops in a positive and responsible light in view of recent tension over the Dutch Policy within other European countries.

Having had the opportunity to experience the illicit drug policies and view the programmes in the Netherlands, it is appropriate to acknowledge the reduction in drug related harm evidenced over the past twenty years.

Over the past seventeen years, drug related harm in the Netherlands has seen the following outcomes:



- average age of clients attending drug services (problem drug users) has gone from 26.8 years of age in 1981 to 36.2 years in 1995<sup>11</sup>,
- the percentage of clients presenting to drug service providers under the age of 22 has gone from 14.4% in 1981 to 1.6% in 1995<sup>12</sup>

The Dutch policy of splitting the illicit drug market into two, one of acceptable harm level illicit (cannabis products) and the other of unacceptable harm level illicit (heroin, amphetamine, cocaine, psychoactive etc.) has enlisted the cannabis coffeeshop businesses and market in the task of separating the harmful illicit drug markets from mainstream youth culture.

In terms of easily identifiable and unarguable drug related harm, a cursory glance at overdose fatalities illuminates policy outcomes clearly.

In Australia in 1995 there was 634 fatal overdoses on a population of just short of 17.7 million<sup>13</sup>. In the Netherlands, 37 Dutch citizens died of overdose in the same year on a population of 15.4 million<sup>14</sup>.

The social control aspects of Dutch policy are ensuring that there is greater vision of the complex illicit drug markets. This has lead to a greater capacity to manage and implement policies that reduce drug related harm. The programme just outlined could not be contemplated in Australia due to the underground nature of cannabis use.

It is conceivable that the recent changes to cannabis management in several states, including Victoria, will lead to a reduction in cannabis prices, possibly equal to or less than that of a unit of heroin. If this occurs, the Dutch experience raises the question for an Australian context: will a reduction in price, and an increase in user accessibility to what the Dutch have termed 'acceptable harm level' illicit, reduce levels of use of unacceptable harm level illicit, such as heroin, by Australian youth?

In essence, The Convenience Advertising 'Hash and Grass' program has demonstrated how progress can be made in the communication of drug and health related information, in a public context, if that communication is undertaken within a drugs policy framework which does not homogenise illicit drugs. The Dutch model, which demonstrates varying degrees of tolerance towards cannabis as an 'acceptable harm level illicit', and which demystifies cannabis as a drug, and makes it accessible to a consuming public, has the advantage of freeing up supply control resources to focus on unacceptable harm level illicit, such as heroin, and in so doing minimising the levels of harm caused by these drugs.

<sup>11</sup> . GG GD Amsterdam, (1996) published treatment statistics.

<sup>12</sup> . *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> . Howard, J. (1997). The Prime Minister's Press Release, Tough ON Drugs.

<sup>14</sup> . European Drug Monitoring Report (1996). table 5. Number of Drug-related deaths and populations at risk.

