

MARIHUANA

CHEMISTRY, BIOCHEMISTRY, AND
CELLULAR EFFECTS

EDITOR:

Gabriel G. Nahas

CO-EDITORS:

William D. M. Paton and

Juhana E. Idänpään-Heikkilä

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Preface: Why Another Monograph on Marihuana?

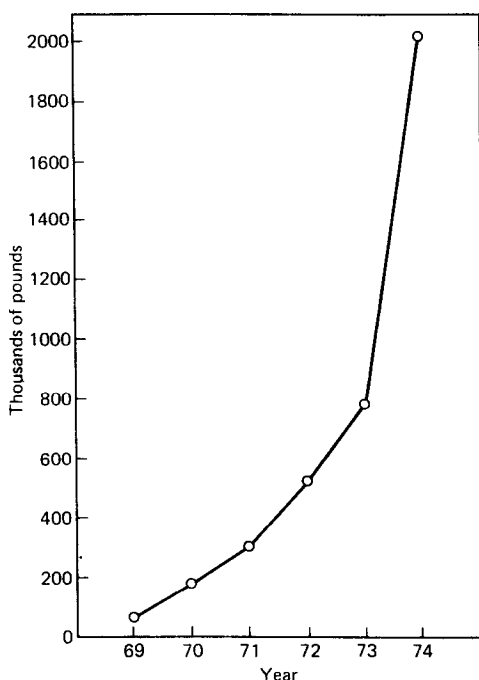
Hasn't this subject been exhausted over the past 6 years by the publication of the dozen volumes that preceded the present one? After numerous investigations on the acute effects of marihuana smoking in man described in hundreds of papers, what is left to know? Following the studies of chronic users performed in Boston, Los Angeles, Jamaica, and Greece, hasn't the marihuana question been settled?

Shouldn't we now consider marihuana a "soft drug" to be used for recreational purposes, like alcohol or tobacco, with minimal danger to the user and little damage to society? A number of scientists have already given an affirmative answer to these questions, and their opinions, amplified by the media, seem to be shared by a large section of the lay public. On the other hand, some investigators claim that old empirical observations confirmed by recent scientific evidence indicate that marihuana is a harmful drug. As a result, a great marihuana debate is now raging in the scientific and lay press of the United States. Let us hope that it will not linger as long as the tobacco debate, which was settled only a decade ago.

Meanwhile, the use of marihuana, especially by adolescents, has been spreading exponentially in countries where it was nearly unknown 20 years ago (see figure on the following page). It even seems possible that some countries are prepared to give a new legal status to this drug, thereby eliminating the social stigma attached to its use. Marihuana would no longer be considered a "stupefying drug," like opium or coca leaf derivatives, the Single Convention Treaty on Stupefying Drugs would be bypassed, and marihuana products would be made commercially available.

It is against this background that the Helsinki Symposium on Marihuana, which is recorded in this monograph, was organized under the aegis of the Sixth International Congress of Pharmacology. This symposium was called to discuss the biochemical and cellular effects of marihuana products in the general perspective of their long-term use.

Following the work of Agurell, Paton, Lemberger, and Axelrod, investigators established that the fat-soluble cannabinoids remain in tissues for days and weeks. However, routine pharmacological studies



Removals of marihuana by USA federal authorities (domestic and foreign cooperative). (In order to roughly estimate the amounts consumed, the amounts removed are usually multiplied by six.)

From "Hearings of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Judiciary (Subcommittee on Internal Security): Marihuana-Hashish Epidemic, Part II, The Continuing Escalation, May 8, 1975," U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1975.

then indicated that accumulation of these foreign molecules did not seem to affect permanently any of the vital functions over weeks and months as "tolerance" to their use developed.

At the same time, studies by several cell biologists were published in close succession: Zimmerman, the Leuchtenbergers, Jakubovic, McGeer, Succiu-Foca, Armand, Nahas, and Morishima all had independently investigated the effects of marihuana products on cellular anabolism and cell division. A common conclusion emerged from their studies, which employed widely different models: cannabinoids in concentrations of 10^{-6} to 10^{-4} M inhibit the synthesis of DNA, RNA, and proteins in replicating eukaryote cells. Mechoulam's Δ^9 -THC and all natural cannabinoids tested—whether psychoactive or

not—as well as their metabolites which accumulated in tissues, inhibited cell anabolism.

These *in vitro* observations were confirmed *in vivo* by Rosenkranz: Rodents given marihuana by ingestion or by inhalation exhibited impairment of growth, spermatogenesis, and the immunity system.

A number of investigators reported the inhibitory effect of marihuana in man on pulmonary macrophages, lymphocyte function, and sperm production.

Although these results await additional confirmation, all of the present experimental evidence tends to corroborate the early *in vitro* observations which reported an impairment of cellular anabolism by cannabinoids.

Only longitudinal epidemiological studies of marihuana-smoking populations may document the pathologic effects of long-term cannabis usage. To my knowledge the literature does not contain a single autopsy report on a long-term chronic marihuana smoker. Therefore the human pathology of marihuana cannot be written before two or three decades. (It took sixty years for investigators to establish the pathology of tobacco smoking.) Meanwhile, on the basis of their present short-term observations and past experience with other drugs, biologists and physicians can only make certain predictions about what this pathology might be.

The papers contained in this monograph, inasmuch as they describe some of the interactions between the biologically active molecules contained in marihuana and the basic components and processes of living cells, might help the biologist and the physician assess the long-term effects of marihuana use on reproduction, embryological development, learning, and growth, as well as on the integrity of physiological functions.

Gabriel G. Nahas
Helsinki, July 1975

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Contents

I

Marihuana Chemistry

Detection and Identification of Cannabinoids and of Their Metabolites

- 1 **Cannabinoid Chemistry: An Overview 3**
R. Mechoulam, N. McCallum, S. Levy, and N. Lander
- 2 **Detection and Identification of Compounds in Cannabis 15**
C. Waller, K. Hadley, and C. Turner
- 3 **Pyrolysis of Cannabinoids 31**
C. Salemink
- 4 **Some Aspects of Cannabis Smoke Chemistry 39**
*T. A. Kephalas, J. Kiburis, C. M. Michael, C. J. Miras,
and D. P. Papadakis*
- 5 **Identification of Cannabinoids and Metabolites in Biological
Materials by Combined Gas-Liquid Chromatography-Mass
Spectrometry 51**
M. E. Wall and D. R. Brine
- 6 **Comparison of Various Solvent Extractions for the
Chromatographic Analysis of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol and Its
Metabolites 63**
J. C. Schoolar, Beng T. Ho, and V.S. Estevez
- 7 **Radioimmunoassay of Cannabis Products in Blood and
Urine 71**
V. Marks, J. D. Teale, and L. J. King
- 8 **Mass Fragmentographic Assays for the Cannabinoids and
Their Metabolites 87**
J. Rosenfeld
- 9 **Examination of the Metabolites of Δ^1 -Tetrahydrocannabinol
in Mouse Liver, Heart, and Lung by Combined Gas
Chromatography and Mass Spectrometry 93**
D. J. Harvey and W. D. M. Paton

- 10 Identification and Quantification of Cannabinoids in Urine by Gallium Chelate Formation 111
R. Bourdon
- 11 Forensic, Metabolic, and Autoradiographic Studies of Δ^8 - and Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol 123
W. W. Just, G. Erdmann, G. Werner, M. Wieckmann, and E. Thel

I

Marihuana Chemistry

Kinetics and Biotransformation

- 12 Cannabinoids: Metabolites Hydroxylated in the Pentyl Side Chain 141
S. Agurell, M. Binder, K. Fonseka, J.-E. Lindgren, K. Leander, B. Martin, I. M. Nilsson, M. Nordqvist, A. Ohlsson, and M. Widman
- 13 Identification of Hydroxylated Cannabinoids by PMR and Mass Spectroscopy 159
M. Binder
- 14 The Pharmacokinetics of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol and Its Metabolites: Importance and Relationship in Developing Methods for Detecting Cannabis in Biologic Fluids 169
L. Lemberger
- 15 Rate of Penetration of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol and 11-Hydroxy- Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol to the Brain of Mice 179
M. Perez-Reyes, J. Simmons, D. Brine, G. L. Kimmel, K. H. Davis, and M. E. Wall
- 16 Changes in the Metabolism of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol Caused by Other Cannabis Constituents 187
G. Topp, J. Dallmer, and J. Schou

II

Marihuana:

Biochemical and Cellular Effects

Effects on Isolated Cell Systems

- 17 The Influence of Marihuana on Eukaryote Cell Growth and Development 195
A. M. Zimmerman and S. B. Zimmerman

- 18 Inhibition of Proliferation and Differentiation of *Dictyostelium Discoideum* Amoebae by Tetrahydrocannabinol and Cannabinol 207
S. Bram and P. Brachet
- 19 Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol: Effect on Macromolecular Synthesis in Human and Other Mammalian Cells 213
R. D. Blevins and J. D. Regan
- 20 *In Vitro* Inhibition of Protein and Nucleic Acid Synthesis in Rat Testicular Tissue by Cannabinoids 223
A. Jakubovic and P. L. McGeer
- 21 Cytological and Cytochemical Effects of Whole Smoke and of the Gas Vapor Phase from Marihuana Cigarettes on Growth and DNA Metabolism of Cultured Mammalian Cells 243
C. Leuchtenberger, R. Leuchtenberger, J. Zbinden, and E. Schleh
- 22 Effects of Δ^8 -Tetrahydrocannabinol, Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol, and Crude Marihuana on Human Cells in Tissue Culture 257
M. A. Stenchever, K. J. Parks, and M. R. Stenchever
- 23 Errors of Chromosome Segregation Induced by Olivetol, a Compound with the Structure of C-ring Common to Cannabinoids: Formation of Bridges and Multipolar Divisions 265
A. Morishima, R. Henrich, S. Jou, and G. Nahas
- 24 Effect of Δ^1 -Tetrahydrocannabinol on Red Blood Cell Membranes and on Alveolar Macrophages 273
A. Chari-Bitron
- 25 Cannabinoids: Effects on Lysosomes and Lymphocytes 283
A. Mellors
- 26 Inhibitory Effects of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol on Nucleic Acid Synthesis and Proteins in Cultured Lymphocytes 299
G. Nahas, B. Desoize, J. Hsu, and A. Morishima
- 27 Cellular Alterations Induced *in Vitro* by Δ^1 -Tetrahydrocannabinol: Effects on Cell Proliferation, Nucleic Acids, Plasma Cell Membrane ATPase, and Adenylate Cyclase 313
J. Huot
- 28 Cannabinoids and Neoplastic Growth 329
R. A. Carchman, W. Warner, A. C. White, and L. S. Harris

II

Marihuana:

Biochemical and Cellular Effects

Interactions with Neurotransmitters

- 29 A Comparison of the Subcellular Distribution of Cannabinoids in the Brains of Tolerant and Nontolerant Dogs, Rats, and Mice After Injecting Radiolabeled Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol 349
W. L. Dewey, B. R. Martin, J. S. Beckner, and L. S. Harris
- 30 Sites of Neurochemical Action of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol Interaction with Reserpine 367
B. T. Ho and K. M. Johnson
- 31 Effects of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol on the Homosynaptic Depression in the Spinal Monosynaptic Pathway: Implications for Transmitter Dynamics in the Primary Afferents 383
R. Capek and B. Esplin
- 32 Effects of Cannabinoids on Isolated Smooth Muscle Preparations 397
S. Rosell, S. Agurell, and B. Martin
- 33 Effects of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol and Cannabinol on Rat Brain Acetylcholine 407
E. Domino
- 34 Cannabinoids and the Inhibition of Prostaglandin Synthesis 415
J. F. Howes and P. F. Osgood
- 35 Effects of Cannabinol Derivatives on Blood Pressure, Body Weight, Pituitary-Adrenal Function and Mitochondrial Respiration in the Rat 425
M. K. Birmingham and A. Bartova

II

Marihuana:

Biochemical and Cellular Effects

Organic and Developmental Effects

- 36 The Immune Response and Marihuana 441
H. Rosenkranz

- 37 Teratologic Effects of Cannabis Extracts in Rabbits:
A Preliminary Study 457
E. Fournier, E. Rosenberg, N. Hardy, and G. Nahas
- 38 Alteration of Δ^9 -Tetrahydrocannabinol-Induced Prenatal Toxicity
by Phenobarbital and SKF-525A 469
B. Mantilla-Plata and R. Harbison
- 39 Pharmacogenetic Studies on Cannabis and Narcotics: Effects of
 Δ^1 -Tetrahydrocannabinol and Morphine in Developing Mice 481
S. Radouco-Thomas, F. Magnan, and C. Radouco-Thomas
- 40 Permanent Learning Impairment After Chronic Heavy Exposure
to Cannabis or Ethanol in the Rat 495
K. A. Febr, H. Kalant, A. E. LeBlanc, and G. V. Knox
- 41 Cannabis Sativa Derivatives: Effects on Brain Function
of Monkeys 507
R. G. Heath
- 42 Marijuana's Effects on Human Gonadal Functions 521
W. C. Hembree III, P. Zeidenberg, and G. Nahas
- 43 Cellular Effects of Chronic Cannabis Use in Man 533
C. N. Stefanis and M. R. Issidorides
- Concluding Summary 551
W. D. M. Paton
- Index 553