

## **NATIONAL MEN'S HEALTH WEEK: Mental Health: Does cannabis and alcohol cause schizophrenia in black men?**

16 June 2006 Deborah Gabriel

### **No evidence cannabis leads to schizophrenia in black men**

Consultant psychiatrist Dr Dele Olajide states the black community must vociferously challenge the assumption that smoking cannabis causes schizophrenia in black men and explains how alcohol abuse can lead to increased violence in relationships.

Dr Dele Olajide is a Consultant Psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital in South East London. and is using the occasion of **National Men's Health Week**, which has focused on mental health this year, to speak out on two issues which he feels have not been properly explored and which are more myth than fact.

The use of cannabis among black men is an extremely controversial area. Cannabis is also referred to as ganga, marijuana, herb, weed or skunk - a more potent form of cannabis favoured by young people. The debate centres on the view of some academics that cannabis use causes psychosis among black people.

As Dr Olajide pointed out, previously the debate was that psychosis was caused by a genetic condition: **"But all research on genetics and schizophrenia among black people has not been conclusive,"** although some speculate that environmental causes are the reason for the apparent prevalence of schizophrenia among black people, especially black men. But Dr Olajide is not of that opinion: **"I myself do not believe that because there is no evidence of direct causality."**

According to Dr Olajide all the research suggests is that cannabis may be contributory along with other factors. If all of the other factors are not present a person could smoke cannabis and it would not lead to psychosis. A large number of people, both white and black smoke cannabis who never develop psychosis.

**"What we can say is that if you are predisposed to psychosis or schizophrenia and you start smoking cannabis it is likely to exacerbate your symptoms to make it worse,"** he told Black Britain. This is because the experience of paranoia can be intensified with cannabis use. It also intensifies the feeling of being relaxed and causes demotivation, which is a common symptom of schizophrenia.

But Dr Olajide warned: **"What we must fight and challenge in the black community is the blanket assumption that cannabis use in the black community is causing an epidemic of schizophrenia. That I disagree with and I think we must resist it and challenge it on every occasion."**

He pointed to the number of people- both black and white who smoke cannabis including undergraduates across the country who do not become schizophrenic and was critical of the suggestion that black people who smoke cannabis do: **"Even**

**scientists who advise the Home Office agreed that there is no evidence to suggest a direct link between cannabis use and schizophrenia at the moment,"** he said.

Black Britain asked Dr Olajide to comment on the experience of Devon Marsden who was sectioned after being examined by a psychiatric doctor and after being questioned about his cannabis use. His response was that it is common for someone who might experience paranoia for other reasons to be assumed to be suffering from cannabis psychosis when it is learnt that the person smokes it: **"That label is increasingly sticking to black men,"** he said.

But jumping to such conclusions is dangerous because it prevents investigation into other possible causes of schizophrenia: **"For example, racism is a major, major cause of psychological stress in black people. Even people who are so-called 'normal' experience a pernicious impact of racism on their lives,"** he said.

Dr Olajide said that within the pool of socially deprived black men there will be many who smoke cannabis but this does not necessarily mean that it causes schizophrenia and there is no such evidence to support that theory. Large scale research in Sweden and the Netherlands has looked at this but has found no significant evidence of any associated cause of schizophrenia.

## **Are black men abusing alcohol?**

According to figures quoted in the diversity section of the new Haynes Brain Manual launched during NMHW, 52 per cent of African Caribbean men with a history of alcohol abuse also have a mental disorder.

Dr Olajide told Black Britain that alcohol has not been a major problem in the black community: **"Historically black people are not known for alcohol dependence, but it seems that in the last ten years there has been an increasing use of alcohol in the community by black men."**

Figures obtained from the Health Survey for England in 2004 show that black men drink less than the general population. Only 10 per cent of black Caribbean men and 7 per cent of black African men drink everyday compared with 20 per cent of Irish men and 18 per cent of the general population.

This is also confirmed in the numbers of men who are non-drinkers – 15 per cent black Caribbean and 32 per cent black African compared with only 10 per cent of Irish men and 8 per cent of the general population.

Dr Olajide points out that it is a chicken and egg situation if one is looking to establish whether alcohol might cause mental illness: **"The line of causality is not necessarily known because alcohol abuse is a form of mental illness."**

All races turn to alcohol during times of depression as a form of self-therapy: **"If you are stressed or anxious you are more likely to drink because initially it calms you down."** Using the example of social anxiety, Dr Olajide points out that partygoers always start off with a drink to calm themselves:

**“So alcohol does have a positive effect in reducing social anxiety.”** But the problem arises when those who rely on it all the time to reduce their stress become dependent on alcohol. A man who has lost his job or wife or children and becomes lonely may drink to numb the pain of isolation.

But equally people can drink without becoming hooked on alcohol and it doesn't impair their work, life or relationships. Dr Olajide advises those who are becoming too reliant on alcohol to seek advice. In terms of the incidence of alcoholism among black men Dr Olajide said: **“People who do become dependent are not so common in the black community but we are finding it increasingly so now. It is perhaps a sign of the times that black people are extremely stressed with all kinds of crises in our lives and then we take up drinking to reduce that stress.”**

Psychotic and schizophrenic individuals who hear voices often drink to reduce the symptoms, almost using alcohol like self-medication, but again, Dr Olajide warns that this could get out of hand. There is another group called 'episodic drinkers' who normally do not regard themselves as alcoholics as they binge drink at weekends but drink very little during the week.

Alcoholism also has a knock on effect on relationships, Dr Olajide pointed out: **“You drink and you beat your wife up and there is increased violence in the community and violence towards women. Some violent behaviour is due to alcohol abuse.”**

On the whole alcoholism is where drink is taking over your life. Even where an individual does not have the financial means to drink so frequently, because it is an addiction they will find the money. They may steal or pawn things in order to get their daily alcohol fix.

**“This is a new phenomenon in the black community and it is not as common as other illnesses. This is partly because we have never really known how serious anxiety and depression is in the black community.”**

Most research on mental health which looks at the black community tends to be about schizophrenia, but alcoholism is equally damaging. There is simply not enough research on alcoholism in the black community and there is equally insufficient research into anxiety and depression which lead people to drink alcohol in the first place.

Dr Olajide told Black Britain that research into mental illness among black men in the UK is woefully inadequate because it has tended to focus only on African Caribbean men and has been preoccupied with schizophrenia. But what is needed is much broader research into schizophrenia outside of the hospital environment and in the community itself. Furthermore social causes of schizophrenia and the effect racism has on mental health should be properly researched along with studies of anxiety and stress and how these affect black people.