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PTSD victims deserve science, not censure

By Jim Taylor

Early last month, veteran RCMP officer Ron Francis committed suicide. Francis claimed that smoking marijuana helped him cope with PTSD, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The RCMP ordered him to turn in his uniform, and put him on sick leave.

Obviously, marijuana wasn't enough to save him.

"The treatment that he should have received just wasn't there for him at the end," said Francis's friend and lawyer T.J. Burke.

It wasn't there for 16 other RCMP officers who committed suicide over the past nine years, along with 15 retired members. Or for 160 armed forces personnel, also suffering from PTSD. Both Canada and the U.S. have now lost more members to suicide than to the enemy combat they faced in Afghanistan and Iraq.

PTSD has been known for a long time, but has only been taken seriously in recent years. The Greeks described it after their battles with the Persians. World War I called it "shell shock"; military tribunals executed about 100,000 afflicted soldiers for what was then seen as cowardice or mutiny. By World War II, it was called "combat fatigue." American troops returned home with "Post Vietnam Syndrome."

PTSD didn't make into psychiatry manuals until 1980.

It's now recognized that it affects not just war veterans. Also emergency workers, abuse victims, and survivors of disasters.

Untested solutions

Hundreds of those people have turned to marijuana for relief of their symptoms. After his second deployment in Afghanistan, Fabian Henry tried numerous anti-depressants to control his suicidal thoughts and violent rages. But only one drug worked for him -- marijuana.

“It literally changed my life,” Henry told the *Globe and Mail*. “I went from suicidal and homicidal, from threatening to kill people and beating people up, to doing yoga seven days a week and spending more time in nature with my kids.”

There’s lots of anecdotal evidence. But amazingly, it seems, there have been no scientific studies of why, or how, or even if marijuana actually works.

Until now. Last week UBC-Okanagan professor Zach Walsh announced plans for Canada’s first clinical trials of marijuana as a treatment for PTSD. Tilray, a Health Canada licensed producer based in Nanaimo, B.C., will provide the marijuana, and also contribute to the study’s estimated \$350,000 cost.

It’s about time.

Physical injuries – amputations, chronic illness, disability – receive recognition for affecting a person’s life. Mental injuries do not. Because they’re invisible, it’s too easy to say, “Smarten up! It’s all in your mind!”

But it’s addictive!

Psychiatrist Dr. Paul Sedge, who works with veterans at an Ottawa mental health centre, identified the automatic objection to such a study. “Marijuana is a substance of abuse and dependence,” Sedge said.

Agreed – marijuana can be addictive.

But I can’t wondering why our society is so paranoid about addiction. Four months away from her death from terminal cancer, my mother objected to taking an opium-based medication to control her diarrhea. She was afraid of becoming addicted.

I’m not defending addictions – whether to drugs, gambling, work, or anything else. But the primary charge against marijuana is as a “gateway” to more serious addictions. And that’s nonsense. Both tobacco and alcohol are far more potent gateways. Indeed, the ultimate gateway is probably breathing – every addict, to anything from heroin to soap operas, started out by breathing.

The gateway does not cause the addiction; the addiction looks for a gateway.

Any objective comparison would have to conclude that marijuana is less dangerous than alcohol, the other pain-killer most favoured by PTSD sufferers

Alcohol can be toxic; countless people die every year from alcohol poisoning. But as Robert Gable wrote in *American Scientist*, “I’ve found no published cases in the English language that document any deaths from smoked marijuana.”

Alcohol consumption often leads to violence, especially in domestic situations; marijuana tends to have the opposite effect.

Although mild use of alcohol, such as an occasional glass of red wine, may enhance health, excessive consumption causes liver damage, contributes to heart disease and dementia, and accounts for one out of every 15 cancer deaths in the industrialized world.

In fact, according to the Journal of the American Medical Association, alcohol consumption is the third leading cause of preventable death in the United States.

Need for clearer knowledge

No similar statistics have ever been compiled for cannabis. Which doesn't make marijuana innocuous. But it does emphasize the need for a proper study of its supposed benefits.

"There are many existing medications that have more science behind them," said psychiatrist Sedge.

Precisely. That's why this UBC study is important. It will be a scientifically valid, triple-blind, randomized test of the efficacy of various strains of marijuana, administered through a vaporizer, for treating a long-term mental condition. Neither the investigators nor the participants will know which strain they're getting, or if they're getting marijuana at all.

Out of it we may finally have something better than anecdotal evidence and paranoia, to assess whether marijuana really can alleviate PTSD.

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YOUR TURN

Sexual harassment – the subject of last week's column – is obviously a hot topic.

Steve Roney challenged my reference to a video of a young woman walking through New York to a constant chorus of catcalls, etc.: "It might have seemed from the video that there was a constant but clearly there was not. The walk was ten hours long, and the video is two minutes long. Do the math."

Steve quoted my line: " If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then

harassment is in the emotions of the harassed." And responded, "This is a good reason why 'sexual harassment' in this sense cannot be a crime. It would mean (and does mean) any woman could convict any man of sexual harassment at will. This is an obvious and gross violation of equal protection before the law."

Ted Wilson picked up on the same point: "Having a good, in relative terms, justice system does not necessary equate to a just society. In our society when a man is accused of sexual harassment or child abuse they far too often are presumed guilty immediately, and that perception can continue even when they are proven innocent. It may not be just, but it is the way it is. That's why Justin Trudeau had to do what he did.

"You hit the nail squarely on the head with your observation that 'harassment is in the emotions of the harassed.' What wasn't harassment yesterday could be today, but maybe not tomorrow, depending on the mood swings of the 'victim'. I would argue that sometimes the real victim is the so called harasser who is at a loss to know where he stands.

"I would also argue that you didn't go far enough in asking 'What is harassment? How do you prove it?' If we cannot define it or prove it how can we disprove it. Given the current social attitudes that can be very difficult."

Dorothy Haug reminded me that connections can be both positive and negative: "We/I are sometimes very quick to react to language or touch, both given and received, without examining how the other person in this human transaction might have felt or what was meant by it. Sometimes it takes days/months or even years to understand what pain we might have caused or felt. There is only a deep unease when we think of it. It would be great if we could turn to the individual and articulate what we experienced right then but we often need more time to process what that is.

"The myriad times that we 'get it right' and there is joy in the touch or delight in the phrase/comment we give or receive may not be remarked upon but may still add to the fabric of our daily interactions in a positive way."

Alex McGilvery defended Justin Trudeau's decision to suspend his two MPs: "It is standard procedure to suspend someone accused of harassment until the case is proven or not. I'm not arguing that it is right. That is a whole other argument...

"You talk about that thin, invisible line and much of what you say is

true, I would suggest that if you maintain awareness of the person you interact with, that you would see in their reaction clues about how close you are to crossing that line.

“Much of the discussion around harassment is ‘They should have said something’ which immediately implies that it is the woman’s responsibility to communicate, when both people have equal responsibility for the health of their relationship. It is unfortunate that apparently a large number of the male population have no clue of the effect they have on the people around them.”

“Thank you for this thoughtful piece,” wrote a woman who asked to remain nameless. “You are correct: ‘If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, then harassment is in the emotions of the harassed.’ This declaration is an essential piece of Sexual Misconduct Policies for organizations.

“As a woman, I have experienced harassment as a child, a young adult, and as an adult, in public and work related settings. There are men who have no sense of boundaries, no insight into their own behavior, nor insight into interpersonal dynamics. Luckily, I have also experienced men who are thoughtful, aware of themselves and the issues of interpersonal dynamics, and who with care and intelligence helped create and maintain comfortable environments.

“And, I would like to add, the issue is not simple: I recently learned from a young female relative of her work experience where she experiences harassment that includes sexual issues, by her female supervisor.”

I’m also going to withhold the name of this writer: “Having been the victim of harassment and worse (which goes without saying since I am a woman), there are a lot of nuances to be considered.

“In your example of when to tell a woman that she looks nice, it is usually safe to say something flattering if the woman is a family member or a friend, or, if she is a stranger, if she invites comment. If these criteria are not fulfilled, a comment from a strange man is generally not welcomed.

“You mentioned different cultural expectations, but even within those cultures, the actions are still harassment. They are designed to keep women in their place as objects of the male gaze, as sexual beings whose sole purpose is to make every man’s ego plumped up. Women don’t like it. They may go along with it because they have no choice, but that doesn’t make it okay. It is soul destroying.

“We also have cultural expectations within generations. I was sexually

harassed at work by a man 20 years my senior who never understood that he had done anything wrong because he had been doing these things his whole life and no one ever complained. He was judged by his peers and found innocent because they too had that generation's expectation of what acceptable behaviour is, and could not understand that because it was 'okay' 40 years ago, doesn't make it okay now."

And finally, on this subject, one line from Nancy Kerr: " It seems to me that sometimes men in work settings want to assert their dominance by treating women as sex objects — maybe some women do too — in order to assert their 'place'."

George Brigham was too busy to respond the previous week, to the column on Remembrance Day. But this week he recommended "another excellent poem for Remembrance that was only written a few years ago by the present (British) Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy. It often moves me deeply. It's called 'Last Post'."

George printed the whole poem, too long to insert here. But it imagines being able to run time backwards, like a film, to see the wounds healed, the life renewed. It's worth looking up.

Likewise, Frank Martens referred to W.B. Yeats' poem, 'The Second Coming,' written after World War I:

**"And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?"**

Frank commented, "As someone who is interested in the Middle East wars and their possible repercussions, I thought this poem was very apropos..."

TECHNICAL STUFF

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Other sources worth pursuing:

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, www.seemslkegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, www.traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
