



## Cannabis Use by Forestry Workers

The young logger was keen and good at his job. He left home early as usual. In less than two hours he was lying dead in the arms of his workmates. The Coroner placed some of the blame on the cannabis THC in his blood system. How many other accidents are the result of being “stoned” at work?

OSH has been aware of the drug problem in forestry and last year decided to carry out a survey. A Canterbury University student interviewed 165 forestry workers about their opinions on cannabis use.

With more young people working in forestry the incidence of cannabis use was expected to be high. OSH wanted to determine if cannabis use was related in any way to higher chances of accidents.

The study showed that forestry workers had begun using cannabis as early as age 10. Most began at about age 15. Highest use was amongst young silvicultural workers aged between 20 and 24 years, and lowest in loggers with more than 8 years’ work experience.

A third of workers who use cannabis do so on the job. As cannabis use increased, so too did the injury rate with heavy cannabis users having almost three times as many lost time injuries as non-users. Heavy cannabis users also had twice the number of sick days off as non-users.

Forestry work demands high physical performance and work fitness. Hazards in forestry — chainsaws, steep terrain, machines, long hours of work — demand

control through vigilance and awareness. Cannabis use increases fatigue and the chances of making errors in judgement and getting involved in an accident. More than half of the 165 forestry workers agreed with this.

So why risk getting stoned on the job? Silvicultural workers who use cannabis, believed it helped them to relax. Being stoned helps break the boredom of the job and helps with the physical pain of the job. They also believed being stoned helped them do a better quality job.

Loggers had different views. They didn’t think being stoned helped them relax. They didn’t think you could work stoned. Sharing a joint wasn’t friendly and accepted on the job. And they didn’t think being stoned helped break the boredom of the job or help with the physical pain. Loggers did not think they did a better quality job stoned.

Loggers were older (average 32 years) compared with silvicultural workers (21 years). The younger silvicultural worker smoked on average, nearly 8 joints per week compared with the older logger’s 1 joint per week. However, the highest use of cannabis was by young trainees who smoke, on average, nearly 10 joints per week.

Many workers, especially silvicultural workers, believe they can carry out the job safely stoned as long as they are experienced. The findings of the survey, however, do not support this. Experience and age did not affect the likelihood of being injured when stoned. The likelihood of being injured was

instead directly related to the amount of cannabis being used. Heavy users had three times the chance of being injured as non-users.

The *Approved Code of Practice for Safety and Health in Forest Operations* does not allow anyone to be at a forestry workplace under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Some employers are requiring drug testing of new employees. Over 70% of the 165 forestry workers surveyed were in agreement with drug testing.

The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 imposes duties on both employers and employees to take responsibility for managing hazards. The physical hazards present in

forestry work are compounded when drugs are introduced into the forestry work environment.

Drug abuse must be managed. Employers and employees working together can achieve this. Both parties must agree on a drug abuse management programme that is suitable to both the crew and the employer.

It is necessary to change the belief of some forestry workers that drug use increases the work output and breaks the boredom of the job. This belief can be changed through meeting the requirements of the legislation and the code, which will ensure a safer and healthier workplace for all.

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