

## Local scientist, Henry Lowe, bats for ganja research

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**SCIENTIST Dr Henry Lowe Saturday called for the sanctioning of research into ganja's medicinal properties, arguing that Jamaica needed to lead the way with this venture, despite challenges presented by the North.**

"Ganja has become such a major issue globally, sometimes one wonders why. The United States government is almost paranoid about it. But it has certain medicinal properties that need to be looked at," said Lowe, who is executive chairman of the Environmental Health Foundation and chairman of Blue Cross of Jamaica.



Scientist Dr Henry Lowe (left) receives a gift basket from Michael Tucker, chairman of the Caribbean Poison Information Network (CARPIN), on Saturday following Lowe's presentation on ganja and toxicity in natural products at the Network's second annual scientific conference held at Knutsford Court Hotel in Kingston. (Photo: Lionel Rookwood)

"That is where I think we ought to go, because in the long run, if ganja is proven to be useful as a broad-based medicinal agent, as many people think, then it will find its place in the sun," he added.

Lowe, famous for his groundbreaking research for a cure for cancer in two plants endemic to Jamaica, was addressing Saturday's second scientific conference of the Caribbean Poison Information Network (CARPIN) held at Knutsford Court Hotel in Kingston.

He noted that for too long, as in the US today, the focus was on researching the negatives of ganja and other herbal products.

"We (in Jamaica) should continue to take a leadership role in medicinal research on ganja in particular, and on all other natural products rather than concentrating on fighting the toxic properties only, such as those brought on by smoking," he said.

What is more, Lowe said there is a considerable amount of money to be made from developing the herbal industry.

"Whether we like it or not, herbal supplements are big time," said Lowe, who earlier this month was named the Observer Business Leader for 2006. "It is now a multi-million dollar business in Jamaica and a multi-billion dollar business globally. We still have over 60 per cent of our population using bush medicines and using bushes for tea," he said.

The researcher noted that it was useless for the authorities, here and abroad, to continue to try to stem the supply of ganja since the demand existed for the product. Government, he said, needed to focus instead on educating people about the plant.

"The illicit use of ganja continues because of demand, which is used for cultural, religious and/or recreational purposes. My personal view is that we are flogging a dead horse if we continue solely on the path of supply reduction," Lowe said.

"That battle can never be won. What we want more of is demand reduction. And that can only come through education and proper management of what is to be done, and I think this not only applies to ganja but all other illicit drugs," he added.

At the same time, he made it clear he was not a proponent of decriminalising ganja - an issue that has long been debated on the island to the point where a National Ganja Commission, headed by Professor Barry Chevannes of the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, was set up to look into the matter. The commission found in favour of decriminalisation, but the Government has not yet made a move to seeing the commission's recommendation through to fruition.

"We have to be careful about decriminalisation.

One of the reasons is that if ganja is decriminalised before a proper education programme is done, then you can imagine that anybody will walk around anywhere and blow ganja in your face," said Lowe. "Look at what is happening in Britain and the United States and everywhere, smoking is almost now outlawed. Whether you like it or not, you go into a room where people are smoking, you are inhaling the smoke and it is having the same effects on your body. The only way to prevent it is by outlawing it."

Ganja has been used medicinally for 6,000 years, according to data supplied by Lowe. More particularly, the plant has been used in the treatment of

asthma and glaucoma. In fact, it was local scientists who developed the drugs Asthmasol and Canasol from cannabis (ganja) to treat those two conditions. Unfortunately, because of the US stance against ganja, the drugs cannot be exported there and are only distributed locally.

In addition to the treatment of asthma and glaucoma, ganja has been used to treat nausea and vomiting, especially related to cancer and HIV/AIDS; neurological disorders; wasting syndrome as well as for appetite stimulation in HIV/AIDS patients; and multiple sclerosis.