

Analysis and Correspondence

On the term “narcotic” and the purposeful imprecision of language concerning Cannabis

By Jason B. Schechter, PhD

There are numerous modern definitions of “narcotic,” though they all refer back to their original source. Botanically and chemically, those pharmacologically active molecules produced naturally in the gooey resin of the *Papaver somniferum* plant—the opium poppy—are known collectively as “opiates.”

The “opioids” are a broader category of opiate-like compounds, including some that we humans generate internally (endogenous opioids like endorphins, enkephalins, etc.), semi-synthetic opioids (like heroin, which is artificially synthesized from the opiate morphine; or oxycodone, which is artificially synthesized from the opiate thebaine), and fully synthetic opioids (like methadone). To repeat: opiates come naturally from only one botanical species, the *Papaver somniferum*.

The mechanisms by which all of these external compounds affect our human condition are so named because of the drugs themselves —our bodies and brains have opioid receptors that receive their marching orders, if you will, from binding to EITHER endogenous (internal) opioids OR exogenous (external) opiates or opioids.

Mirroring the effects of the endogenous opioid peptides (our molecular keys) and their receptors (our biological locks) that serve prominent roles in both natural pain transmission and reward mechanisms, in most animals the primary response to the binding of an opioid receptor (same locks) with OPiate compounds (different keys) is analgesia (pain alleviation), an increased feeling of well-being (euphoria) and somnolence (sleepiness).

Calling non-opiate drugs “narcotic” just because they make you sleepy is inaccurate.

The botanical name of *Papaver somniferum* means, literally, “sleep-bringing poppy.” The word “narcotic” derives from the ancient Greek *ναρκῶ*, *narkō* (literally “I benumb”), and describes this sleep-inducing effect of the opiates. Therefore, to be precise, opiates are narcotic in their effect, and to put it most simply, opiates are narcotics.

Calling non-opiate drugs “narcotic” just because they make you sleepy via some other mechanism is inaccurate. Go ahead and drink two (legal, regulated, non-opiate) shots of vodka and take two (legal, unregulated, non-opiate) capsules of Benadryl®, wait 30 minutes and then see how sleepy you are feeling. How would that level of sleepiness compare to that brought on by the most potent Cannabis?

Our sloppy usage of words, coupled to corporate-state pressure to demonize and criminalize the Cannabis plant, allows the “narcotic” label to be placed on medicinal marijuana. Further, it enables prosecutors to define Cannabis as an addictive, dangerous substance which, by any legitimate scientific estimation, it is not. Some strains of Cannabis (many sativas) won't even make you sleepy.

Comparing the risk profiles of these two classes of compounds is ludicrous. Cannabis is not a narcotic.

Cannabinoids and the opiates and opioids have entirely different activities in the brain and body. Opioids and cannabinoids rely on disparate, separate biological mechanisms of action. Opiates affect entirely different endogenous receptor systems and have almost nothing in common with how cannabinoids exert their effects. While both *Papaver somniferum* and Cannabis strains may be medicinal, comparison of the risk profiles of these two classes of compounds is ludicrous. Cannabis is not a narcotic.

Add Hemp Advocates: Beatrix Potter

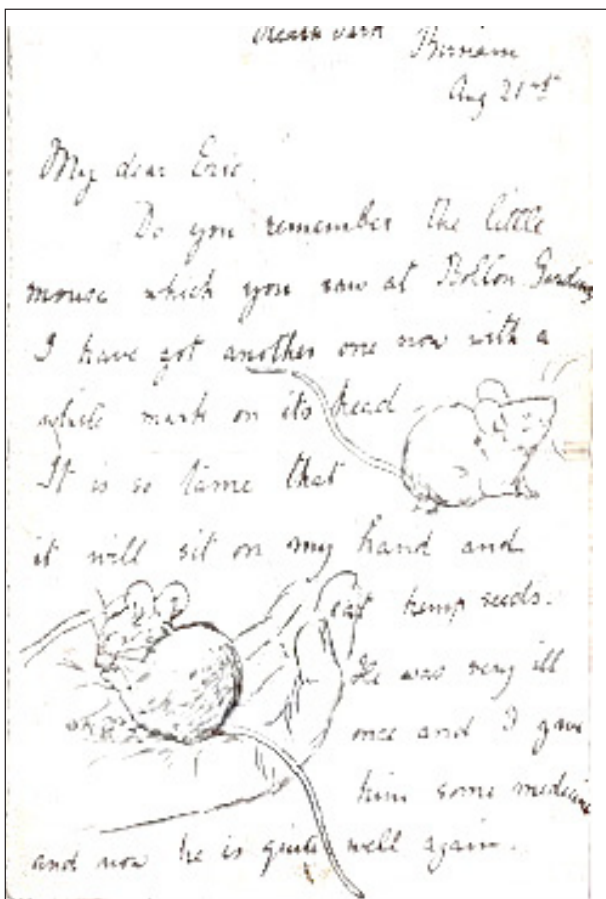
A show of Beatrix Potter's illustrated letters to children opened in New York recently and was written up by Edward Rothstein in the *Times*.

In one of the letters, to a three-year-old named Eric, Potter wrote: “Do you remember the little mouse which you saw at Bolton Gardens? I have got another one now with a white mark on its head. It is so tame that it will sit on my hand and eat hemp seeds. He was very ill once and I gave him some medicine and now he is quite well again.”

We infer that the hemp seeds had at least a potentiating effect. Or maybe she was using “medicine” in the way that Californians often do.

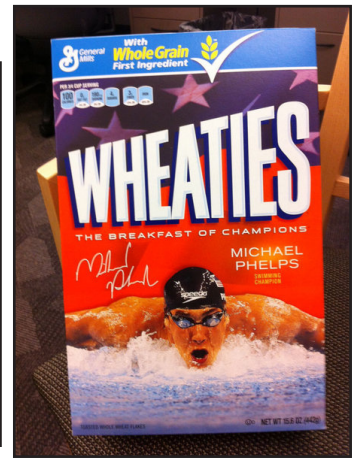
Potter loved life forms and observed them carefully. She “sketched animals, objects and fungi as if training herself for a career as a naturalist,” according to Rothstein, and you can see it in her drawings. The *Times* critic detects a slightly subversive edge in her benign-seeming bestsellers. Potter's best known character, Peter Rabbit, had mischievous tendencies.

Many of her stories, writes Rothstein, “reflect similar visions of malfeasance, punishment and modest redemption: Peter gets sent to bed with camomile tea after nearly being baked in a pie, Squirrel Nutkin is almost eaten by Old Brown the owl, Benjamin Bunny gets a whopping from his father.” Her characters have a “drive for independence” that gets “thwarted by various forms of switch-bearing authorities.”



Graphic from the Cotsen Children's Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

Michael Phelps's Serial Cereals



To the editor:

On the occasion of Michael Phelps winning his 21st Olympic Gold medal, here's the famous photo that caused Kellogg's to take him off their cereal boxes... According to the Indian Hemp Drugs Commission, bhang bongs inspire athletes to greater glory. And think of his lung capacity! May he breathe forever, the Greatest Olympian of all time.

—Michael Aldrich

memo: General Mills, the makers of Wheaties, offered Phelps an endorsement deal after his great success in Beijing... Back in February 2009, when Kellogg's hastily unloaded their inventory of “tainted” Frosted Flakes and Corn Flakes, the San Francisco Food Bank was surprised and delighted to receive 3,800 one-pound boxes. Breakfast cereals are a rarity at the food bank and to suddenly take delivery on almost two tons was a big score for them. The director commented at the time, “The boxes have kind of flown off the shelves.” I wondered how many were being picked up by potpreneurs planning to sell them on ebay. Pot partisans promptly called for a boycott of Kellogg's and it made a dent in their sales.

Kellogg's was then in the news for buying salmonella-laced peanut butter and paste.

The sanctimonious corporation had declared, “Michael's recent behavior is not consistent with the image of Kellogg.” Aye, a fine image! Kellogg's was then in the news for buying salmonella-laced peanut butter and paste. The products they'd had to recall included Austin and Keebler brand Peanut Butter Sandwich Crackers, and some Famous Amos Peanut Butter Cookies and Keebler Soft Batch Homestyle Peanut Butter Cookies.

Sixty Minutes did a segment about Phelps before the London Olympics. His attention-loving mother explained to the camera how she'd made the boy shape up after the bong episode: “Come on, Michael, get with the program.” We hope her program doesn't include pushing him to compete in Rio in 2016. Likable Michael said that after the Beijing Olympics he looked forward to traveling the world, returning to and actually *visiting* the cities in which he'd spent his time in hotels and swimming pools.

Wherever you go, Mike, bring the Rick Steves guidebook —and have fun!

Payphones and Quarters (Hemp Tour P.S.)

It was actually our little NORML chapter in Illinois and Ben Masel who organized the Hemp Tours, right from the start. We got so mad about Hash Wednesday, we organized events on five Illinois college campuses the next year, and invited everyone to tour around with us. National NORML sent Jon Gettman, who they fired when he got home for having been on the road with us. Steve DeAngelo came with his partner Ruby Pearl, who was born and raised in Champaign/Urbana (as was Steve Hager and Chef Ra, and Keith Stroup went to college there).

Ben Masel showed up with a school bus with Jackson Clubb (who Bill the Cat was modeled on) driving, and we all hit the road. Ben loved the project so much that he funded me to drive all over that summer meeting activists in the surrounding states, many times just grabbing people that looked like stoners and getting them excited, and we went to all the surrounding states the next season (Iowa, Wisconsin, Indiana, Missouri).

That winter, we did “advance work” in 17 states, and this time Monica Pratt went out with me to find and train organizers. (That first time it was just me and my dog, Cassidy, in a car my mom let me borrow.) Jack Herer showed up with his bus on that second tour, and stayed with us for all those years. Elvy likely hopped on board then, too. Steve D. started sponsoring us right away, offering tons of help to keep the show on the road, and a place for us to sleep when we were not, as the crew was homeless for two years straight. We organized all that while on the road with no office, no computers, and no phones. Payphones and quarters! It was so fun!!!!

I am very glad it is getting some attention, as so much of the work that followed started here. The Marijuana Policy Project (MPP), Americans for Safe Access (ASA), Students for a Sensible Drug Policy and many more sprang from the Hemp Tour and our Cannabis Action Network.

Debby Goldsberry, Oakland CA

Hassled by Word Police

Dear O'Shaughnessy's,

I'm tired of being stopped by the Word Police every time I walk down the street with marijuana on my lips. They say I'm supposed to use the Latin name of the plant, *Cannabis*, at all times, and that I'm “doing a disservice to the cause” every time I call it marijuana.

What's your line on this?

J. Canseco, Miami, Florida

Dear J.,

The word cops contend that the term *Cannabis* has medical overtones, which is true. But Latin terms also have liturgical overtones, so to some people *Cannabis* is a priest in a black robe, while marijuana is the beautiful senora on a Mexican restau-

rant's calendar, Hemp is a reliable farmer in overalls Pot is a hard-working short-order cook, and Weed played in the band behind Cab Calloway. Respect them all! Use 'em or lose 'em!



1914 U.S. Federal Reserve note depicting the harvesting of hemp.