

Early cannabis use may affect academic achievement

A collaborative study of more than 6,000 New Zealanders and Australians found those who used cannabis before the age of 18 ended up with fewer academic qualifications.

The research was based on the combined findings of three studies, including the University of Otago's long-running Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS). The other studies were the Victorian Adolescent Health Cohort Study and the Mater University of Queensland Study of Pregnancy.

Researchers found young people who used cannabis before age 18 were more likely to fail to complete high school; less likely to enter university and less likely to attain a university degree.

Early users of cannabis were less likely to achieve academically, even when other factors such as socio-economic status, previous educational achievement and other personal factors were taken into account.

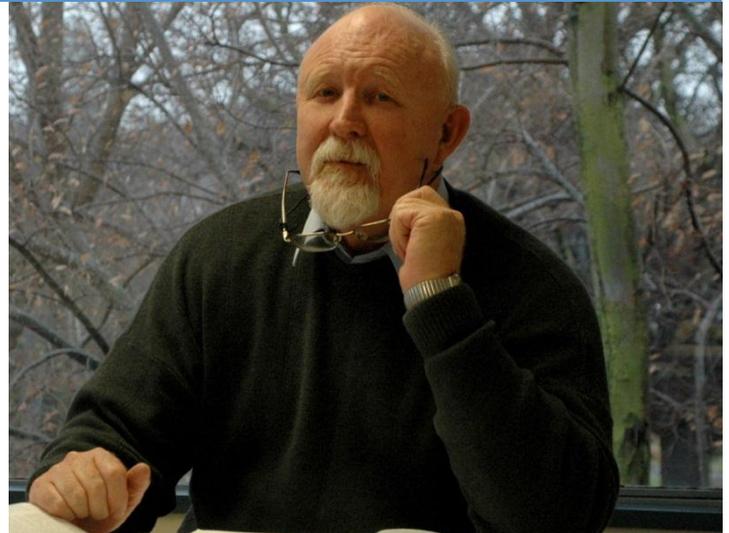
People who used cannabis before age 15 were the most likely not to graduate from high school, not attend university or fail to get a degree.

The findings also suggest that the early use of cannabis has a somewhat greater effect on the educational achievement of males than females. This was particularly evident for university entrance. Other negative outcomes associated with early cannabis use are mental health problems, driving impairment and increased use of other illicit drugs.

CHDS director Professor David Fergusson says the research shows a robust association between the early use of cannabis and educational under-achievement. He says that possible reasons for this robust association may be that early use of cannabis sets in train biological, individual or social processes, which affect the young people's motivation, learning or commitment to education.

The key parts of this study are summarised as:

1) The research illustrates the importance and value of developing international collaborations which combine data from a series of studies that have gathered similar data. Such analysis overcomes the limitations of specific



Professor David Fergusson

Key words:

- Cannabis, academic qualifications, socio-economic status, education, mental health

Aims of this research:

- To establish the effect of cannabis use on academic qualifications

studies and provides a test of the generality of findings.

2) In terms of size of association, the study found evidence of moderate to large associations between the age of onset of cannabis use and educational attainment. Following adjustment for confounding factors when compared to those using cannabis by 15, those not using cannabis by the age of 18 had chances of high school completion that were 2.9 times greater; chances of university enrolment that were 1.9 times greater and chances of attaining a university degree that were 2.5 times greater.

3) The collaboration between the CHDS and other Australian cohorts was the first stage of a wider collaboration to examine the linkages between cannabis and personal adjustment using data from several Australasian cohorts.

This research is funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand.