

WHY KIDS DON'T BELIEVE

OUR SOCIETY is great at throwing words like "alienation" around. And every pamphlet we have seen on drugs has paid lip service to the notion that kids turn to drugs because they can't find what they want in the society around them. But it seldom occurs to most of us — and apparently never occurs to writers of pamphlets on drugs — that there are any concrete reasons why kids snicker at drug panels, sneer at pamphlets, laugh at the lectures of judges and law enforcement officers.

Recently the government of New Brunswick placed its credit behind a series of pamphlets on "drug abuse" produced by the Maternal and Child Health and Health Education Divisions of its Department of Health and Welfare. While these pamphlets are not quite the insult to their readers that the comic book produced by the Alcoholism and Drug Addiction Research Foundation of Ontario is, they are sufficiently misinformed, distorted and palpably wrong to ruin the government's credit with the kids who need to know the facts. And this is serious, because most of us rely on governments for unbiased information on topics like this. If a user perceives that the pamphlet is palpably misinformed on one subject, why should he believe it when it warns him that methamphetamines can kill him?

Here are some of the ways in which the pamphlets undermine the government's creditability

*The pamphlets are apparently intended to be taken as part of two series, one entitled "The Adolescent in Society", the other "Development and Adolescence." But both include **only** pamphlets on "drug abuse". This suggests either that the government has a pretty partial view of adolescence (is drugs the only adolescent problem of any importance?) or else it indicates that the government is trying to pass off as disinterested and scientific what is really a propaganda effort.

*The pamphlets present as scientific fact what is in fact only anecdotal and unverified. For instance, one states that the chronic user (they do not define "chronic") of marijuana "fails to attend to his physical, economic and social needs, . . . lives in a state of inactivity and lethargy, (and) his intellectual and social performance is so 'bogged down' by this crutch that he cannot function to his full capacity in the school or in the community." There is no qualification of this statement; it says quite flatly that this is true of **all** chronic users. Now in fact, of course, this is not necessarily true (especially if "chronic" isn't defined) and anyone who knows anything about marijuana — mainly, it's pretty obvious, the kids to whom the pamphlet is directed — knows this because he knows "chronic users" who function quite adequately in society. The pamphlet is using scare tactics and they simply have to backfire.

*The first pamphlet in both series lists Hashish under the

"narcotics" section with heroin, morphine, codeine, and opium, and it is indicated that it is addictive. In fact, of course, hashish is merely the resin of the marijuana plant and is not a narcotic at all; and anyone who knows this will assume that it was planted in this section as another scare tactic.

*Pamphlet No. 5 gives the clear impression that methedrine can cause hepatitis — but does not make it clear that this results from unsterile needles rather than any effect of the drug itself. Again, this is hardly deliberate dishonesty, but it is clear that anyone who knows the truth is likely to regard this, too, as an attempt to sow panic without regard to accuracy.

Although it's likely that those to whom the pamphlets are addressed will conclude that this sort of misinformation is the result of a conscious effort to deceive, this is not necessarily so. The conviction — clearly a justifiable one — that drugs are dangerous can combine with panic and a lack of sophistication about scientific method and statistical validity to produce this sort of distortion quite easily. But whatever the reason, the effect is the same as though the government — and many other respectable bodies — were crying wolf.

Perhaps the best comment on the situation is found in the government's own pamphlet: "A solution to this troubling situation is education and information, and not conjecture based on emotion." **m.e.**