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Session I

CANNABIS PRELUDE

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Mankind's knowledge about marihuana parallels roughly the mythological beginnings for wine and opium and antedates recorded history. The drug is reported to have been described nearly 5000 years ago by the famed Chinese emperor, Shen Nûng. In the second century A.D. the Chinese surgeon, Hua-t'o, used marihuana as an anodyne but the Chinese were either not aware of or were not attracted by its euphoriant properties at that time. Since then, however, the psychotropic effects of the drug have been utilized in the Far and Middle East for many centuries. Marihuana was scarcely used in the United States before the 20th century, and indeed, it was not until the past decade, when smoking of the drug spread from the ghetto to our youth in the suburbs, that usage grew to epidemic proportions. And so, we are now concerned about "pot" and will devote the entire morning and afternoon to learning about this very old drug.

It may seem strange to some that we need to spend so much time discussing a drug that has been written about so extensively in fictional, medical and scientific writings. The reason for this is, of course, that most of the writings on marihuana have been anecdotal. Even the scientific papers based on carefully gathered data were of limited value because the results have been difficult to repeat. As Dr. Coy W. Waller will discuss, different sources of marihuana vary in their composition and no reference standard marihuana was available to different laboratories for making comparisons. Tests were also hampered by the fact that it was not possible to establish a reliable animal model to assess the psychotropic actions of the drug. This has all been changed by the isolation of Δ^9-tetrahydrocannabinol (Δ^9-THC) from marihuana and its subsequent chemical synthesis by R. Mechoulam. And thanks to our co-chairman of this symposium, Dr. Harris Isbell, who, with his associates, demonstrated that the effects of Δ^9-THC in man are very similar to the effects of the plant material, the potency of different marihuana preparations can now be largely defined in terms of Δ^9-THC content.

In addition to Δ^9-THC, closely related isomers and synthetic surrogates are available for research. Some have been around for quite a while and two of our speakers will describe some highly interesting old information for the first time. We will also hear about findings on the fate of Δ^9-THC which should have important implications as should the studies on tolerance. There will be those who argue that Δ^9-THC is not pot, so we shall also be listening to basic and clinical studies on the plant product. The suggestion that Δ^9-THC is not pot can now be subjected

to verification, since a uniform standardized marihuana preparation, as well as an abundant supply of Δ^9-THC, are now procurable from the National Institute of Mental Health without cost.

All of the above studies are probably still in progress but enough work has been completed to give you a report. Two years ago when the subject of a marihuana symposium was suggested, I demurred because I felt that there was insufficient concrete scientific evidence. Since then, there has been a spate of publications on the pharmacology of the drug and it has been necessary to expand this symposium to two sessions. I now feel guilty because I could not include more participants. For those who either have very strong feelings on what marihuana does or does not do, I hope the program today will be enlightening and will serve to dispel some of the emotional climate surrounding the drug. I do not believe that this new knowledge will solve our social problems concerning marihuana. However, for those in the position to enforce, make judgments and determine policy, this symposium should provide some scientific basis for making more informed and rational decisions.