

Hard road back from deadly habit

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"The regimen is very strict, but very appropriate" ... Sunil Hemraj's marijuana-related schizophrenia caused him to kill his fiancée. *Photo: Lee Besford*

IT'S been 16 years since voices in Sunil Hemraj's head spurred him to take a hammer and kill his 22-year-old fiancée.

Now living in south-west Sydney and employed part-time, Mr Hemraj, 38, is proof that given the right mental health treatment, even those who commit the most heinous crimes can be rehabilitated, learning to manage their condition with medication and therapy.

Mr Hemraj, a former bank worker, was found not guilty by reasons of mental illness after the attack at the couple's Mortdale unit in October 1996. He was later diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia.

His heavy marijuana use had triggered paranoid delusions and imaginary voices which told him that his friends, family and workmates were "part of an elaborate conspiracy".

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"I felt I was being followed, that my phones were tapped. I thought that terrorists were going to attack Sydney and the world was coming to an end," he said.

The court ordered Mr Hemraj enter the forensic mental health system for intensive treatment. He spent another year in Long Bay jail's hospital.

"I felt that despite being acquitted on the grounds of mental illness without a criminal conviction being recorded, I was still treated like a prisoner. You look in the mirror and you are wearing a prisoner uniform. It was very frustrating," he said.

"You are pretty much just housed and medicated."

Mr Hemraj was eventually moved to the Bunya Forensic Rehabilitation Unit at Cumberland Hospital, where psychiatrists, dieticians, therapists and specialist nurses would intensively treat and monitor his illness for the next three years.

"You are given medication in front of another person. In the jail system, they just give it to you in a satchel and you can take it or not," he said. "The regimen is very strict, but very appropriate, and there is a lot more focus placed on rehabilitation."

As his condition became more manageable, he also accepted that his illness had driven him to kill.

"I realised that this was a mental illness, and there was a real possibility that this [crime] was done by me. I realised I had to take steps myself to treat myself."

Mr Hemraj completed several TAFE courses while at Bunya, and authorities deemed him fit for staged release in 2007.

He now works in the mental health sector, advocates for forensic patient rights and receives ongoing psychiatric care. But the consequences of his crime still haunt him.

"To lose a fiancée at your hands for a reason that makes no sense, and could have been prevented, is one of the hardest things one could go through," he said.

"I feel a lot of guilt and remorse for what's happened. You don't know regret until you've walked in my shoes."

Matters referred to in the front page story do not specifically apply to Mr Hemraj's case.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/hard-road-back-from-deadly-habit-20120320-1vi0r.html>