

Opinion

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The Rapidly Expanding and Profitable Marijuana Industry Threatens to Ignore Past and Present Safety Concerns, Especially for Adolescents



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Abstract

Today's cannabis is much more potent than the marijuana of the 70's & 80's, where the % of psychoactive THC usually measured well below 10%. In contrast, the cannabis people are consuming these days may contain up to 30% THC. Thus, it should not be surprising that we are seeing more incidents related to intoxication and more reports from the ER than we used to. While the data are mixed, some studies show sensory motor impairments and an accompanying rise in auto accidents. We also now see reports of young people experiencing stroke, memory impairment, and psychotic episodes, especially to those vulnerable. We also see addiction and a shockingly strong rise in opiates use, such as oxycontin and heroin. What is surprising is the mountain of data collected by good labs, published in high impact factor journals that affirm these concerns, especially as they relate to adolescents. Yet it seems these important findings don't receive the visibility they should.

Opinion

In 2015, sales of legal marijuana were reported at \$5.4 billion and are predicted to be \$10.8 billion by 2018 according to Fortune.com. The growth of the legal marijuana industry is supported by more and more states adopting a legal recreational marijuana stance as well as increasing availability of legal medical marijuana. The industry is attracting entrepreneurs far and wide, with the promise of huge profits and no requirement for professional training that tends to come with these kinds of big dollars such as law school, med school, grad school, business school etc. What's so peculiar about this growth is it comes without support of the DEA, which recently refused to reschedule marijuana as a safer, non-schedule I drug. The DEA went farther and said, upon extensive review, it did not see any specific medicinal benefit to marijuana. Today's cannabis is much more potent than the marijuana of the 70's & 80's, where % of psychoactive THC measured well below 10%. In contrast, the cannabis people are consuming these days may contain up to 30% THC.

Thus, it should not be surprising that we are seeing more incidents related to intoxication and more reports from the ER than we used to. While the data are mixed, some studies show sensory motor impairments and an accompanying rise in auto accidents. We also now see reports of young people experiencing stroke, memory impairment, and mental illness, especially to those vulnerable. We also see addiction and a shockingly

strong interest in opiates such as oxycontin and heroin. What is surprising is the mountain of data collected in good labs, published in high impact factor journals that affirm these concerns, especially as they relate to adolescents, yet it seems these important findings don't become visible to the public often. Or at least we don't hear much of the negative data in the popular press. On the one hand we have an exploding marijuana industry and much more potent cannabis than we have ever seen. On the other hand researchers have generated animal and human data that continue to raise concerns about the safety of marijuana, especially when used by kids. And to give credit, there are enlightened members of the lay community who understand the research, believe it, and are worried for their kids. Part of the discussion related to kids and marijuana use include these three assumptions

The first assumption is that legalization will not change use among adolescents. There are studies that show, when a community does legalize medical marijuana, recreation marijuana use rates elevate among teens. This is presumably due to changing, reduced safety concerns. The second assumption is any safety concerns regarding adolescent use are inflated and kids rarely get into trouble using marijuana. Third, there is no relationship between marijuana use and use of alcohol, nicotine and many more dangerous drugs of abuse such as oxycontin or heroin. Not only does marijuana use encourage use of other

drugs, including prescription opiates, there is now evidence that rodents exposed to THC as adolescents, create offspring with altered genetics that may affect reward and addiction pathways. These animals, that are drug naïve, will work harder for heroin than controls. Marijuana affects cognition. There has been a substantial effort by the pro-marijuana community to diminish findings from some of the best labs in the world that show marijuana impacts cognition and memory. The whole purpose of recreational marijuana is to deliver THC to one's brain to obtain an altered state of consciousness. Of course memory and cognition will be affected. We know from the tobacco industry, huge profits tend to overwhelm ethics and concerns for safety. We know companies within the tobacco industry carefully engineered Joe Camel so he would entice kids to start smoking. Imagine the marijuana industry hiding a dark, dangerous side of marijuana use. We have plenty of evidence already that

marijuana is not safe; it causes negative effects on cognition, mental health and a host of systemic problems including stroke, and cardiovascular problems. Ask yourself this: do adults really need marijuana candies with fun colors, cool shapes and textures, that seem like, perhaps they would be more attractive to children or kids? We know babies have crammed these candies into their mouths leading to toxicity and death. There are so many research studies that call into question marijuana's safety and so much anecdotal information, conversations and discussions many of us have overheard, seen happen, or experienced ourselves. It is the responsibility of a thoughtful society that prides itself on protecting its young, to do just that and take marijuana safety data seriously. Without education and serious effort, it is quite possible this generation of young people will develop serious long-term health problems due to marijuana use they were told was perfectly safe.



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