

Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™ Column

Changing Landscape of Marijuana Legislation

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As marijuana laws change across the country it is important to look at how this affects perceptions and use. First, let's take a look at the breakdown of states which have legalized it in some form. Over half (28) of the states and District of Columbia have passed laws allowing marijuana use for medical reasons. In addition, sixteen states, including North Carolina, allow it for cannabidiol (CBD) only. CBD is the non psycho-active chemical found in marijuana. In 2015, the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) published a review on using marijuana to treat medical conditions, which "showed that there was high-quality evidence for the use of marijuana or cannabinoids to treat chronic pain, neuropathic pain, and spasticity due to multiple sclerosis" but many conditions claimed to be helped by marijuana were not supported. Just last week, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine (NAS) issued a report evaluating over 10,000 study abstracts on marijuana. Only three conditions (all in adults) were found to benefit from medical marijuana: chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, multiple sclerosis related spasticity, and chronic pain. The National Academies of Medicine committee says, "For these conditions [chemotherapy induced nausea and vomiting, MS spasticity, and pain] the effects of cannabinoids are modest; for all other conditions evaluated there is inadequate information to assess their effects." Unfortunately, as a Schedule 1 Controlled Substance, the Drug Enforcement Administration categorizes marijuana with no current medical uses and significantly limits the amount and quality of research that can be conducted.

Eight states and the District of Columbia (Alaska, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington) have now passed laws legalizing recreational use, but what that actually looks like varies greatly from state to state. For example, while Colorado has a huge industry presence, with large grow farms and 3 times as many dispensaries as Starbucks, the District of Columbia allows individuals to have only up to 2 oz. and 6 cannabis plants and it is still illegal to sell or purchase marijuana. Many other states have not yet legalized it but have passed laws decriminalizing marijuana use, which means that possession of small amounts for personal use will not result in a criminal record. However, adding to the confusion is that the amounts vary from state to state. For example, Maryland decriminalized possession of less than 10 grams (about 1/3 of an oz.), while Kentucky possession of less than 8oz. is a misdemeanor. In North Carolina, marijuana has been decriminalized for possession of up to 1/2 oz. and is only considered a class 3 misdemeanor with a maximum fine of \$200. For an understanding of how much this is, it is estimated that 1 oz. (28 grams) of marijuana can roll anywhere from 37-56 joints depending on the potency of the marijuana and how much is used per joint. Decriminalization is legal under federal law because there is still a penalty, such as fines.

As the landscape of marijuana legalization changes nationally, we need to consider the effects it has on changing perceptions of our youth. A December 2016 study published in JAMA Pediatrics indicated "among eighth and 10th graders in Washington, perceived harmfulness of marijuana use decreased and marijuana use increased following legalization of recreational marijuana use". However, there were no differences found on similar measures among Colorado youth. According to Dr. Chudley Werch with Prevention Plus Wellness, the "likely factors associated with the increases in marijuana use in Washington state are reductions in perceived risk and stigma associated with using marijuana. The lack

of changes in Colorado youth marijuana use may be due to Colorado's more developed medical marijuana system and advertising prior to recreational legalization."

Here in North Carolina, a bill was introduced in 2015, which did not pass the House Judiciary Committee. According to the Marijuana Policy Project, new legislation could be introduced as early as this year. If so, we will need much more information to help inform decisions by looking at how legalization is working across the country and if passed, how specific measures have helped mitigate increased use among youth. That does not mean we can shelve the issue until then, though. Legalization in other states is affecting North Carolina youth today. Perceptions about marijuana are changing and prevention science tells us that an increase in use among adolescents may follow. The barriers to comprehensive research that can better identify both medical benefits and health risks, especially for our youth, leaves us without the information we need to make informed decisions. Remind the young ones in your life that just because a substance is legal, it can still be harmful, especially for the developing brains of our youth. Talk It Up.