

*Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™* Column

Decrease in Perception of Harm Increases Use

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As marijuana laws change it is important to look at how this affects perceptions and use. First let's take a look at the breakdown of those states which have legalized it. Over half (28) of the states have passed laws allowing marijuana use for medical reasons. Many assume that once it is legal for medicinal purposes it means they can purchase marijuana through a dispensary (sort of like a marijuana only pharmacy) if they have certain qualifying conditions. This is not always the case. Fourteen of the 28 states allow it for cannibiniol only meaning it is not legal for "loose leaf" 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." (<http://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2338266>), but many conditions claimed to be helped by marijuana were not supported. Just last week, the National Academies of Sciences (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.

Eight states (Alaska, California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington) have now passed laws legalizing recreational use. For example, the District of Columbia now allows individuals to have 2 oz. of marijuana and up to 6 cannabis plants. It is still illegal however to sell or purchase marijuana. Many other states have decriminalized marijuana use, which repealed certain laws making certain acts criminal, no longer subject to prosecution. However, adding to the confusion is that the amounts vary from state to state. For example, Maryland decriminalized possession of less than 10grams, while Kentucky allows up to 8oz (or 230 grams). In North Carolina, marijuana has been decriminalized for possession of up to 1/2 oz. Just for an understanding of how much this is, it is estimated that 1 oz. (28 grams) of marijuana rolls approximately 50 joints (StuffStonersLike – 40, Weedblog- 28-56, High Times- 60-120). Decriminalization is legal under federal law because there is still a penalty, such as fines and/or imprisonment.

The fact that we hear so much about legalization, whether for medicinal purposes or recreational use, leads to a reduction in the perception of harm that marijuana can do. Naturally, we think if it has medical value it must be safe, right? The first question begs to be asked: where are the clinical studies? How much do we really know about its medical benefits? 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." Another question begs to be asked: why are voters being allowed to decide what has medical value, when shouldn't there be scientific support?

We can look at the alcohol and tobacco industry for a reference point as well. When legalized the perception of harm for recreational use also dropped because ‘hey, it’s legal so it must be ok, right?’ With a decrease in perception of harm goes an increase in use. Naturally, the thought is if it isn’t going to hurt me it’s ok to do. We can note from the past, that youth use increases as perception of harm decreases.

Too much of anything is never good, but more importantly - we’ve learned so much in the past 40 years about the harms of tobacco products and are recently learning more about the harmful effects of alcohol, especially on brain development through MRI imaging and other studies. We are beginning to learn the same about marijuana – both beneficial and harmful effects. While many are riding the tide, isn’t it time we slow the boat in this wake of marijuana legalization and start asking hard questions?