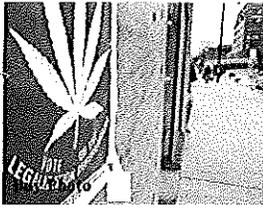


Opinion: Marijuana's adverse impact on youth

Dr. Jon Kevin Porter 5:39 p.m. EDT September 18, 2015



(Photo: Free Press File)

Our elected representatives and candidates for office are engaging in an important conversation regarding the legalization of marijuana in Vermont — an issue which deserves a full airing among our citizenry. The adverse health impacts of marijuana use are serious, especially among young people, and should not be eclipsed by economic considerations driving the debate.

Student success at the University of Vermont does not happen by accident. It requires bringing full attention and energy to bear on the task of each day and taking full advantage of the many opportunities designed to support students in reaching their educational, social and career goals and their developmental maturity. A critical question students across the country must answer is what role the use of alcohol and marijuana will play in their daily lives. Often depicted as simply “part of college,” the misuse of these substances creates serious obstacles to success.

Addressing a problem effectively requires identifying and naming it as such. I write to share concerns raised by a growing body of evidence regarding both the short- and long-term consequences of the misuse of marijuana — a perspective shared by many medical researchers, scientists and clinicians. These concerns are heightened by a roughly fivefold increase in the potency of the drug over recent years and are especially relevant for those who initiate use in adolescence and early adulthood.

Nationally, the number of individuals using marijuana is increasing steadily. Vermont consistently ranks at or near the top of all states in the prevalence of use by our youth. The 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that among all Vermont students in grades nine through twelve, 24 percent reported marijuana use in the previous 30 days. Among Vermont high school seniors, 33 percent reported use in the past 30 days, and one-third of these students reported use on 20 or more days during that time period. This high prevalence of use correlates with lowered concern about the potential harms of regular marijuana use. In the 1994 Monitoring the Future study, 64 percent of high school seniors perceived that regular use of marijuana was likely to be harmful; in 2014, that number was only 35 percent.

The commonly heard expression that “no one ever died from a marijuana overdose” minimizes the cost of unmet potential and inability to fully engage in the challenges of daily life. Scientific research cites multiple impacts of the recreational misuse of marijuana, including:

- Eroded judgment, short-term memory, motor coordination, reaction time, and complex task performance — including operation of a motor vehicle.
- Impaired brain development. Regular marijuana users display reduced neural connectivity in specific areas of the brain, and these changes can be correlated with the variety of deficits observed in this population. Impacts include reduced IQ, processing speed, verbal memory, and executive function. These functions allow us to carry out a range of activities — remembering and following directions, planning events and tasks, managing and organizing time, and juggling multiple tasks.
- Mental health challenges. Younger age at initiation and higher frequency of use are positively associated with anxiety and depressive disorders. In a smaller number of users, the heavy use of marijuana by age 18 is associated with a six fold increase in the likelihood of developing schizophrenia later in life.
- Degraded educational outcomes. Young people who use marijuana regularly are more likely to receive lower grades in high school and delay or never enroll in college, and are more likely to drop out of college than are nonusers.
- Dependence. One out of six users who started in adolescence will become dependent, resulting in a lengthy struggle and substantial lost time for these young people.

I hope that this process will result in a carefully reasoned outcome for Vermont based on the best scientific evidence available. In my role of promoting a healthy and vibrant educational environment, I am convinced that regular use of marijuana presents a powerful impediment to student engagement and success at the University of Vermont — as it does in our high schools and educational institutions nationwide.

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