



COLORADO

Office of Behavioral Health

Department of Human Services

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December 21, 2017

Dear People of Vermont,

I am writing to strongly encourage you to not vote for any further legalization of marijuana for your state until you wait several years to see the true outcomes from states like Colorado where we have fully legalized it and therefore truly commercialized it with numerous unintended serious consequences.

I am a board certified addiction psychiatrist and have been working in this field since 1990. I have been the medical director for a 90-day inpatient dual-diagnosis treatment program at the State Hospital in Pueblo, Colorado since 1999 where we treat people with substance use disorders and mental illnesses who have failed other levels of treatment. In the past 10 years we have treated over 800 individuals from all over the state. While 83% of them report using marijuana, only 4% were treated for a primary cannabis use disorder. The primary diagnoses were alcohol use disorder, polysubstance use disorder (usually including opiates) and methamphetamine use disorder. These patients use of cannabis definitely did not prevent them from using other drugs and for most it was a “gateway drug”, initiated at an average age of 14 ± 4 , sometimes before alcohol or tobacco which are both also gateway drugs.

When we legalized medical marijuana in Colorado in 2000 I was initially not that concerned about it. I truly thought at the time that it was similar to alcohol and that while some people could use it responsibly, like alcohol, others would have problems and we would just treat it like those who have problems with alcohol. However, this is no longer the case, because I was basing this belief on the marijuana of the 1980s and 90s when the THC concentration was 5% at the highest. I believe the cannabis industry and our elected officials have been totally irresponsible in countenancing the mass production of plants with 20 – 40 % THC and concentrated products where the THC can be as high as 100%. This is no longer a “soft drug” and it is causing symptoms in vulnerable people similar to “hard drugs”.

Anytime the potency of a drug is increased, there is corresponding increase in addiction rates. Our program is a very intense, cognitive-behavioral program that has about 50 hours of group per week with lots of reading and writing required by the patients, in order to help them change their thinking and learn new ways to cope. Up until 2014 (when recreational marijuana became available) we had a successful program completion rate of 80%. In 2015 this dropped to 72% and to 66% in 2016. At the same time we saw a doubling in the number of people presenting with a primary cannabis use disorder. The primary psychiatric symptom related to poor completion rates in our program is presence of psychotic symptoms. The drug most highly associated with psychotic symptoms in our patients was cannabis at 42% while only 7% of those with methamphetamine dependence exhibited psychotic symptoms. We definitely are seeing,



similar to the literature, that cannabis induced psychosis is difficult to treat with antipsychotic medication and these people have significant difficulty with cognition or learning something new.

The primary psychiatric diagnosis we have seen in the last 10 years is PTSD at 37%. We have seen this increase to 47% in the last three years, since recreational marijuana was available. With 84% of these patients using marijuana – it has clearly done nothing to “cure” their PTSD and we are finding the very disturbing occurrence of “false memory syndrome” in some with heavy marijuana use. This is documented in the literature and we find it difficult to treat PTSD when the trauma they are experiencing never actually occurred or the experience was distorted and solidified in their mind by their marijuana use, creating delusional thinking.

The biggest problem is we cannot predict who, as adults, will be “vulnerable” to the psychosis inducing effects of marijuana. We can predict that our children and adolescents are definitely in this category. There is a great deal of research indicating when marijuana use is initiated during adolescence, a time of significant brain development, there is a significantly increased risk of alcohol/drug addiction, psychotic and depression and anxiety symptoms and well as decrease in cognition/ IQ. As we have “normalized” this drug, the majority of the population, including children and their parents, believe marijuana is “safe” and “healthy” and “cures” many illnesses. We have advertising in the newspaper daily from dispensaries which indicate you can use cannabis to treat any number of illnesses. This is no different than the advertising from the tobacco companies back in the 1950s when they had physicians advertising how helpful tobacco was for them. The dispensary bud tenders are basically practicing medicine without a license when they are making “recommendations” of what strain to use for whatever ails them. They have strains they recommend for all the psychiatric conditions without any research backing up the claims. Attached is a representative ad in the Pueblo Chieftain newspaper for Christmas.

Pueblo, Colorado seems to be the epicenter of marijuana growth and use in Colorado. The Healthy Kids Survey in 2015 indicated that 30.1 percent of teenagers in Pueblo reported past month use of marijuana – the highest in Colorado. We also have the highest incidence of suicide in teenagers and the highest rate of heroin overdoses in Colorado. The correlation between these is extremely strong but I believe we are seeing “causation” as well. The beauty of my treatment program is we can keep someone for 90 days in a controlled environment with no access to any addictive drugs, including tobacco, which gives the brain a chance to heal and the patients an opportunity to begin to learn new things. The hardest sell is to convince them that there is anything wrong with marijuana. It usually takes the full 90 days of continued education and “motivational interviewing” to get them to change their mind in the slightest. Sadly we have had several patients whose primary drug of choice was heroin, self-report thinking they will have to leave the state because they realize that if they smoke marijuana they will be right back to using heroin and there is a dispensary on every corner.

We have to dispel the myths that marijuana is safe and that it is safer than alcohol. I am seeing this as a burgeoning public health nightmare that combines the worst of alcohol and tobacco while adding in a little psychosis. I hate to think that we continue down this road of allowing the industry to put out their hype about how great it is and how much money your state will make while we lose a generation of children to addiction and serious mental health problems.



Good luck in your decisions and I hope I helped some in terms of education about our real life experience with, what our Governor has termed, a “social experiment”.

Sincerely,

Libby Stuyt, MD
Medical Director, Circle Program

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