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Marijuana isn't harmless - especially for kids

By Sheila Polk

My Turn

Fri Sep 13, 2013 2:47 PM

Odds are you know someone with an addiction: 2.3 million people over the age of 12 sought substance/alcohol treatment in 2011, according to the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Add those not seeking or unable to afford treatment and the numbers escalate.

Marijuana dependence/abuse is twice as prevalent as other drugs — 4.2 million Americans (2011), nearly two-thirds of Arizona's population. Nationally, treatment admissions skyrocketed 21 percent (2000-2010), with an average age of 25 and nearly three quarters male. In Arizona, marijuana treatment has surpassed methamphetamine.



Marijuana withdrawal has the same symptoms as other drugs — cravings, irritability, low self-confidence, despondency, depression and suicidal thoughts.

I see public opinion swaying toward marijuana legalization and scratch my head. Recovery is possible, but why mainstream a substance of addiction? One in 11 new users will become addicted — one in six who start as teens and up to one in two who smoke it daily.

As we strive for global competitiveness and lament poor school performance in comparison to our international peers, we must face the truth about pot. It is more crucial than ever to challenge the impression many teens have that marijuana is a benign, unfairly demonized substance.

Regular marijuana use jeopardizes a young person's chance of success — in school and in life. The National Institute of Drug Abuse warns that habitual teen marijuana use is linked to a significant decrease in IQ of seven to eight points, not to mention school dropout or failure, future drug use, and mental health problems. An eight IQ point drop is titanic, sinking a person of average

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Marijuana isn't harmless - especially for

intelligence into the lowest third of the range.

Nationally, one in 15 high-school seniors are regular pot users. The 2012 Arizona Youth Survey found that one in five of Arizona's high-school seniors used pot in the past 30 days and a 14.4 percent cumulative increase in past 30-day use since 2008 for grades eight, 10 and 12.

Parents tell me of their pot-using teens falling behind in school while insisting that marijuana is "medicine." Unlike methamphetamine, heroin, and the horrific synthetics (bath salts/spice), marijuana's harms are not readily apparent: no life-threatening overdose or deterioration into a gaunt and ravaged figure.

The effects are rather subtle: downward life trajectory, erosion of IQ, impaired cognitive development, mental health issues, low education attainment, and the escalation of delinquency. Disintegration over months or years is not easily identified nor does it garner headlines.

I see the harms — child abuse inflicted by the neglectful pot-smoking parent; traffic fatalities by the marijuana impaired driver.

I see the subtle signs of destruction in the growing number of addicted young adults.

Our job as adults is to create an environment to fuel our kids' success. To that end, we must educate them and the voting public about the value of the brain and the damage of marijuana.

Already an uphill battle, the legalization movement feeds teens' perception that marijuana is safe. We can't sit passively by and watch this slow decline.

Marijuana is harmless? Think again.

Sheila Polk is the Yavapai County Attorney and co-chairwoman of MATForce, the Yavapai County Substance Abuse Coalition.

kids

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Teens and marijuana



One in 15 high-school seniors nationally use pot on a regular basis, but the stats are much higher -- literally -- in the Grand Canyon State. The Arizona Youth Survey for 2012 reports **more than 1 in 5** of Arizona's high-school seniors used pot in the last 30 days.

And more kids are getting higher than they used to: The survey reveals a **14.4 percent cumulative increase** in past 30-day use between 2008 and 2012 for grades 8, 10 and 12. More findings follow.

PHOTO BY: Pat Shannahan/The Republic

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Steve Muratore · [Follow](#) · Top Commenter

What has 40+ years of a War on Drugs gotten us? A dramatically militarized law enforcement and ZERO reduction in use of drugs. How much did THAT cost? How many Trillions in tax dollars that could have been spent more productively elsewhere? IF, as Polk claims, there are addiction issues, then treat the addiction. The border violence associated with drug trafficking will be completely undercut and therefore wither away from lack of demand. It is WELL PAST time to decriminalize marijuana.

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Christopher Jacoby · Top Commenter · Chandler, Arizona

I think part of the problem, Sheila, is that government anti-marijuana propaganda has lost its credibility with the masses. Starting with Reefer Madness and running clear through today. You have many points in this piece about the destructive consequences of marijuana use, but if people don't find the research credible, none of that matters. I don't smoke marijuana, nor would I want my children to do so, either, but I do have exposure to people who've used it (some for years) and the fire and brimstone in your story doesn't jive with my experience. I'm not saying you or your sources are wrong- but you are fighting an uphill battle of public perception.

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Gil Fidler · Top Commenter

People don't believe that it's harmful because of all the positive stories in the media about marijuana; it is part of the breakdown in morals or country.

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Jim Weaver · Saint Mary's Catholic High School

I knew a lot of ball players who woke up for it to start their day. It doesn't have a positive long term effect. It desensitizes you to reality.

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Alan Dean Foster · Top Commenter · UCLA 1964-1969

Kinda like alcohol, right?

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Conrad Sloan · Top Commenter · Pinetop-Lakeside, Arizona

Claiming marijuana has physical dependencies like meth, cocaine, painkillers or even alcohol is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard

...ing I've ever heard.

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Donald Mey · Top Commenter · San Lorenzo, California

Ridiculous lies, straight out of reefer madness.

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Alan Dean Foster · Top Commenter · UCLA 1964-1969

Sure marijuana has debilitating side effects. So do alcohol, cigarettes, reality television, too much candy, and a lot more. Want to see something really lethal? Get a tooth from your dentist or butcher and drop it in a glass of coca-cola. It'll dissolve in a week. Do we ban these substances? No, we tax and regulate them (well, not the last two.)

The critical point is that mj is no more (and probably a lot less) dangerous to the public health than cigarettes or alcohol. Without rehashing (no pun intended) all the arguments and details, kindly note that the Netherlands remains one of the most civilized countries in Europe despite years and years of legal to semi-legalization of mj, and that Portugal, despite having decriminalized everything from mj to heroin, has not gone to hell.

Anyway, drug addiction is not a criminal problem but a medical one, and if a fraction of the billions that have been spent on (failed) interdiction and prosecution of users had been spent on health care, education, and treatment, our "war on drugs" would be long since over.

Ms. Polk's pain regarding the subject can easily be alleviated by getting a prescription for oxycodone or the like from her doctor, which while perfectly legal represents the real drug problem in this country.

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Dudley Gibson · Top Commenter · University of Phoenix

Have never used it, do not think it is harmless, but it is no more harmful than alcohol and criminalization of the stuff has not worked, by any stretch of the imagination though billions have been spent on suppression

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Doug Nering · Works at GoDaddy

If marijuana use has a negative impact and leads to a "downward life trajectory", get real and compare it to prison time and a felony record. End it now. Stop "Reefer Madness."

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Richard Clewis · Top Commenter · Tempe, Arizona

An article written by a government attorney who has a vested monetary interest in keeping prohibition in place. Another totally unbiased opinion piece brought to you by this rag newspaper. (sarcasm)

She complains about kids using pot but no one anywhere is suggesting ending marijuana prohibition for anyone other than adults. Just like when we ended alcohol prohibition. In fact a big part of the reason alcohol prohibition was ended was because it was EASIER for kids to get booze during prohibition because of the black market. Just like marijuana. Americans seem to have difficulty learning from history.

The war on drugs is a complete failure that has cost more than a trillion dollars and countless lives here and abroad. The sooner the "war" is ended, the better for our nation.

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Gil Fidler · Top Commenter

Finally someone did a negative article about marijuana; I was beginning to think I was the only one that thinks it's harmful.



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