

Not so fast! A case against legalizing marijuana



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After decades of hearing about marijuana, after repeatedly being told that it's "safer than alcohol," that "it's a medicine," or that "prohibition doesn't make sense so we should just make it legal," most all of us have succumbed to propaganda fatigue and have concluded that since the "War on Drugs" has not substantially curtailed the use of this drug, there's no harm in just making it legal.

Thanks in large part to the millions of dollars marijuana advocates are pouring into advertising and lobbying efforts, 15 states have now passed various levels of decriminalization laws with two states, Colorado and Washington, approving legalization measures that may or may not stand, depending upon the response of the federal

government.

Here in Missouri we see an effort in the city of St. Louis to decriminalize cannabis, and a proposed bill circulating in Jefferson City to do something similar statewide.

One of the more confusing aspects of this debate is the sometimes mixed use of the terms "decriminalization" and "legalization." The words are sometimes used interchangeably, but they have different meanings and, likely, different consequences. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse-St. Louis Area does not endorse legalization. However we see the benefits in an intelligent decriminalization of using small quantities of the drug.

Legalization advocates — those who propose totally eliminating the prohibition of marijuana — pose some convincing arguments, but they willfully ignore or disguise several established scientific facts. Marijuana may be less harmful than other drugs, but it is far from harmless.

The research clearly indicates that marijuana is not only addictive (approximately 1 out of 6 youths who smoke marijuana will develop a dependence) but that the dangers of marijuana are, in fact, far more pronounced in young people than in adults. Marijuana is unquestionably a gateway to other, more dangerous drug use and, unsurprisingly, recent studies show regular users of marijuana may suffer a significant and permanent drop in IQ. The other health risks attached to smoked marijuana (e.g. stroke, cancer, psychosis) are suggested by early research but still unknown.

If the debate over the safety of marijuana sounds familiar, it should. We've been down this road before.

There are disturbing parallels between enjoying marijuana and alcohol. The use of tobacco became socially popular after the Civil War. For a hundred years it was widely used and thought to be harmless. Eventually, as tobacco companies came to know more about the addictive properties of nicotine than the public did, they not only withheld the information, they used it to direct their marketing efforts at young people because the sooner they got us addicted, the longer we'd be a paying customer.

Then, in the 1960s, things changed. Science stepped in and began to study tobacco use and learned what big tobacco already knew. And more. The link to lung cancer was rapidly established, and warning labels were affixed to the side of every package. The reaction among smokers was immediate and visceral; they were irate that their drug of choice was being called into question; they denied and challenged the findings and, with the help of the tobacco industry, found flaws with the science.

Eventually, as the studies mounted, the evidence became irrefutable. Smoking this drug was not just a bad idea, it was a terrible idea. Not only did it cause cancer, it also contributed to heart disease and other pulmonary issues such as emphysema. Does anyone still believe tobacco is harmless? Is anyone really happy that tobacco is legal, is marketed to and is easily available to our kids?

For the last 45 years we've been trying to curb the use of tobacco, arguably our No. 1 public health threat. Is there a lesson to be learned from this? It would seem so. While it may make sense to intelligently decriminalize the use of marijuana, a legitimate case for full legalization has yet to be made. Introducing another likely "legal" threat to public health — especially the health of our youth — is misguided, premature and ill-advised.

The NCADA endorses the SAM (Smart Approach to Marijuana) Project proposed by Patrick Kennedy; read it at learnaboutsam.com. Let's better understand the evidence of harm, achieve a balanced policy in terms of law enforcement, educate the public and, if possible, develop safe and regulated, FDA-approved medications from the active ingredients of cannabis. Ultimately, let's have science weigh in on this before we make another mistake that haunts us for the next hundred years.

Daniel K. Duncan is director of community services for the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse—St. Louis Area.