

Marijuana...

Why it's America's most dangerous drug

Viewpoint Dr. Robert L. DuPont
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For three decades, Americans have been subjected to a well-funded effort to convince them that smoking marijuana is harmless. Legalizers want the public to believe that anti-drug laws cause more harm than the toxic smoke of marijuana.

There is something profoundly wrong with this picture. Far from being harmless, marijuana is the Trojan horse of today's drug epidemic. Efforts to normalize pot use increase its use and thereby add to the substantial harm now being caused by marijuana.

When marijuana use first became widespread in the United States in the late 1960s, the pot smoked by the young baby boomers was weak. Scientific knowledge about the effects of marijuana use was even weaker.

But by 2003, marijuana has become far more potent. During the '60s, marijuana cigarettes had 10 mg or less of THC (9-tetrahydrocannabinol), the psychoactive component of marijuana smoke. Today's marijuana cigarettes/joints may have more than 150 mg of THC.

Today's base of scientific knowledge about the negative health effects of marijuana use is robust. Take a look at the National Institute on Drug Abuse's

Web site (www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/marijuana) and at the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy's Web site (www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/drugfacts/marijuana/index.html)

Let's start with marijuana's effects on the brain. THC hijacks the brain's second most widespread receptors, literally overwhelming them. These receptors are found in the parts of the brain that regulate movement, coordination, learning and memory — as well as higher cognitive functions such as judgment.

THC stimulates the brain reward centers, marking marijuana as unmistakably addictive. Marijuana also impairs the user's ability to form new memories. It diminishes motivation, leading to one of the most common complaints of the pot smokers I have treated: Pot makes them stupid and lazy.

I have come to think of marijuana as the "careless" drug, because so many pot smokers "care less" about anything that takes work.

As people age, they lose cells in the hippocampus, the brain center responsible for memory. In laboratory rats exposed to marijuana smoke every day for eight months, the rats showed neuron loss in the hippocampus associated with rats twice their age.

Marijuana smoke is especially hard on the lungs. It contains 50 to 70 percent more cancer-causing hydrocarbons than tobacco smoke. Because marijuana smokers inhale more deeply than tobacco smokers, puff-for-puff, the risk of cancer is greater with pot than with tobacco.

Coughing is a common result of smoking pot, a clear sign of the respiratory damage done by this so-called "harmless" drug.

Pot smoking dramatically increases the heart rate and the blood pressure. This may explain why a recent study found that the risk of heart attack during the first hour after smoking marijuana is four times the risk when not smoking pot.

Marijuana use adversely affects the immune and reproductive systems. It is associated with poorer academic performance, poorer work performance and with both criminal behavior and motor vehicle accidents. In a study of a large sample — victims of motor vehicle accidents treated in Maryland's shock trauma unit — more accident victims had marijuana in their blood samples than had alcohol.

Marijuana use leads to more teenagers entering drug abuse treatment than does the use of all other drugs combined, including alcohol. Marijuana use is often linked to tobacco use. Pot use makes quitting tobacco smoking harder.

Marijuana use worsens, and in some cases precipitates, severe mental illnesses from schizophrenia and bipolar disorder to panic disorder.

Why, given this abundance of evidence of the harmful effects of marijuana use, is this drug still so widely seen as harmless?

Marijuana does not produce overdose deaths. It does not produce the prominent withdrawal symptoms seen with some other drugs, from nicotine and alcohol to heroin. These two facts led many Americans mistakenly to see marijuana as "non-addictive."

The damage done by marijuana is often more subtle than the damage done by other illegal drugs. Marijuana robs many of its users of their judgment. This insidious effect makes it harder for them, and people who care about them, to see pot's adverse effects, obscuring the profundity of the damage it causes.

This makes it harder for pot smokers to face their drug- caused problems than is the case for many users of cocaine, meth- amphetamines and heroin. These easily-overlooked adverse effects, and the pervasive pro-pot propaganda, are the reason that marijuana dominates the illegal drug scene in the U.S.

A total of 76 percent of the nation's illegal drug users smoke pot, and 56 percent of the current illegal drug users in the U.S. use only pot.

These serious health problems would be made substantially worse if marijuana smoking were further "normalized" by legalization. If we are to stem the modern drug epidemic, marijuana is where the battle must be waged.

The key to thinking clearly about marijuana use is to start with the recognition that marijuana, far from being harmless, is the country's most dangerous drug.

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