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The Most Controversial & Debated Plant in the Country

INTRODUCTION

Weed, grass, bud, pot, “ giggle-twig,” Kush, “ greenery,” and marijuana are all names for one plant; Cannabis. Whether one has first-hand experience or not, most Americans are aware of what Cannabis looks and how it smells. However, beyond that many people cannot agree on much else concerning the uses, laws and policies of this one, single plant. Some people believe that Cannabis is a dangerous, addictive, illicit drug as equally as threatening as any other drug, like heroin and methamphetamines, also called Speed. However, there are an ever-growing number of people in this country who argue that many of these effects of marijuana are modern myths. They argue that marijuana is not an illicit drug, but a nearly harmless recreational activity, as well as, a natural substance possessing many beneficial medical and therapeutic properties. While the present opposition to marijuana, preferencing greater and harsher policies and laws concerning the plant, the supporters of marijuana and its uses argue for lesser laws, limited policies, and total decriminalization. This perpetual stand-off has manifested in many different laws and policies at the federal and individual state levels. The variation reflects the varying viewpoints and perspectives of the American people concerning the past, present, and future of marijuana in the United States. The solution to the problem will likely be found in change that appeases the need for compromise for all opinions. There is also need for concrete scientific evidence that can support or refute the different facts that exist concerning Cannabis and see the issue come to an amiable solution.

HISTORY

The specific name of the famous or infamous plant that marijuana stems is Cannabis Sativa. It contains an active biological chemical called Tetrahydrocannabinol or THC for short, is what cause the desirable effect, or high that user experiences. Cannabis can be inhaled, consumed, and today can, even, be administered in liquid or capsule forms under certain circumstance. Many Americans of differing ages, genders, and background have experienced the sensations evoked by using marijuana. In fact, one study has determined that 1 in 3 Americans admits having intentionally experimented, socially smoked, or occasionally use Cannabis (Thompson, 2014). The experience of using marijuana is not necessarily exactly the same for everyone, but on average the body reacts by slowing-down reaction times and increased appetite. Under the majority of circumstance, the long-term effects of Cannabis use is limited. Some of the more negative effects reported include dry mouth, red eyes, and occasional rapid breathing. Most physicians' main concern is the potential damage that can be caused from the act of smoking any substance. However that is not indicative of a chemical or physical threat of the Cannabis itself (Ratini, 2014).

The true history of Cannabis is an incredibly long one. There are references to the existence of some form of Cannabis mentioned in religious texts, like the Christian bible. There are references to Cannabis in Hindu philosophies in India, as well as, Native American cultures. It is very likely that Cannabis has been and has always continued to be an active and preferred plant to be used, not just recreationally, but also, in the practice of medicine. All across Europe Cannabis, as well as, hemp, this was a major, mainstay crop. In fact,

when the first colonist settled in the 13 original colonies they were required by Britain to grow the same crops. After all, England was dependent on hemp for the rigging of ships and ropes (Head, 2014).

In the mid 1800s smoking Cannabis cigarettes, today called “ joints,” was not seen as dangerous or inappropriate in any way. The reality is that smoking joints was seen as a sign of high-class and it considered entirely fashionable at the time. However, by the early 1900s the perspective on Cannabis began to change. The Marijuana Tax Act in 1937 aimed to prohibit the sale of marijuana as anything but for medical needs (Head, 2014). In 1951, the Boggs Act began establishing stronger federal penalties and criminal consequences for the distribution and use of marijuana. Throughout the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, the reputation of Cannabis had changed dramatically. It began to be “ villainized” and the propaganda opposed to it made sure to associate the drug with the existing strained racial relations that existed at the time. Much of that propaganda may have stemmed from the budding pharmaceutical industry. Many people, particularly in rural areas, grew marijuana to treat minor aches and pains as opposed to aspirin. For that reason, the " villainization" may have been promoted in order to improve the sales of over the counter medications. Cannabis use became something negative, a deviant, and degenerate behavior whose users were all African-American jazz musicians. Later, the Hispanic immigrants to the United States became the target of racial disparities. Marijuana as we know it today, did come to the United States from Mexico, this caused negative racial perspectives. They inferred that to smoke marijuana would make white Americans lazy and unproductive like the people from the country of its

origin (Thompson, 2013). However, once again the opinions of marijuana continue to change and vary drastically.

DISCUSSION

Marijuana had remained on the list as an illicit, illegal, and dangerous drug. It is considered a Schedule I drug, alongside chemical drugs like “ Speed,” lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), and heroin. Schedule I drugs are deemed to have no medical value and its uses are deemed to have no benefit. However, many people and most research have proven that marijuana may have many medicinal values, which should eliminate it from its current designation.

Today we know that marijuana has many medicinal applications including aid to glaucoma sufferers, prevents nausea in chemotherapy recipients, lessen many of the symptoms of the AIDS virus. Additionally, it is proving to be a benefit for those who suffer chronic pain. However, it is the most recent discoveries that it may have potential contributions possible for people with cancer. It has shown that marijuana may be able to retard tumor growth.

These considerations alone should remove it from the Schedule I listing (Kleber, 2012). There are other aspects of marijuana that, also, separates it from the other drugs that share its category. Heroin alone is highly addictive, can cause immense negative health effects, can alter behavior, diminish one’s productivity, and can lead to death. Worldwide heroin is responsible for 1000s of deaths, of not tens of thousands, every year. However, the number of people who have ever died from using marijuana is, in fact, zero. No one has ever died directly from too great a dose or negative reaction due to the use of marijuana or its active ingredient THC. That said, does marijuana

genuinely belong on the list with truly dangerous and life threatening drugs? More importantly, does it deserve to be considered more dangerous than many of the prescription medications, which are more commonly abused and are often associated with overdose and death (Wing, 2014).

However, regardless of its non-threatening history, the lack of attributable deaths, and the potential medicinal uses that are being considered today, the 1980s War on Drugs, only increased the stigma associated with marijuana. President Ronald Reagan played a huge part in initiating the War on Drugs, which implemented greater initiatives to limit trafficking drugs into the United States. These new policies called for stronger consequences, higher fines, and longer sentences for those caught selling, using, or possessing (McKay 2014). All of which were intended to, ideally, deter those who would buy, sell, or use drugs in general. Unfortunately, this initiative, which began more than 30 years ago, may have had some success; its only real legacy is a negative one. Today we face overcrowded prisons filled with non-violent marijuana offenders; 87% are incarcerated for possession, not sales which is serving excessive sentences that are no longer feasible. Despite these efforts of the War on Drugs, it did little to stem the tide of drugs of all kinds from finding its way into American borders (Marijuana Policy Project, 2014).

Perspectives on marijuana have been changing for decades, and it continues to do so today. People are beginning to rediscover marijuana as an alternative to prescription medications that are more addictive and sometimes carry far more side-effects. These implications have spawned more in-depth and multidisciplinary research that can verify the benefits of

marijuana for society. Unfortunately, the voting public is often torn on the issue of Cannabis. For that reason, it has led to different laws and policies introduced in different states across the country, however, these state policies are, at this time, not necessarily honored by the federal government who still has marijuana on the Schedule I status and the plant remains criminally illegal. Some states carry a 54% split, nearly half of voters are for, and the other half is against lessening the consequences for marijuana users. In other states, nearly 50% supports limited marijuana policies, while only 16% favor seeing the laws stiffened not lessened (McKay, 2014). The Marijuana Policy Project is an organization that supports the decriminalization of Cannabis and monitors all of the different initiatives being promoted in a number of states. A number of states, like California, already have medicinal marijuana policies making it possible for many Americans to apply for and receive legal permission to purchase and participate in marijuana use for medical purposes. However, in the most recent months it is the policies passed in the State of Washington and Colorado that have changed the game. Both have legalized marijuana, which means that citizens of these states can smoke marijuana for medical and recreational purpose without the fear of criminal consequences. Like alcohol and tobacco, marijuana is now a taxable commodity and is only limited by the age limit of 18 on purchases made (2014),

ISSUES

Of course, while Colorado and Washington to supporters are progressive; to opponents it is going to result in many negative and possibly unforeseen

consequences that need to be taken seriously. Opponents fear that legalization will send an inappropriate message to children and to the generations to come. There are a number of specific issues that are valid and do deserve addressing.

Gateway Drug: Many people still believe that marijuana is a “ gateway” drug. Meaning that while marijuana itself may not be that harmful, it could inadvertently encourage users to try other, stronger, and more illicit drugs (Ratini, 2014).

More Marijuana on the Streets: Many other opponents to a legalization, decriminalization, and limited policy and control upon marijuana. Many believe that by legalizing marijuana will only increase the number dealers and increase the number of smokers. The latter is the point of greatest concern. When it comes to underage users and children. Will children, not only be encouraged to use marijuana, but to abuse it (Marijuana Policy Project, 2014).

Health Risks: Much of the opposition worries about the potential health complications that marijuana may cause. If the number of marijuana users increases, then it could increase the number of disease and poor health in the future? Some researchers often worry that marijuana use can cause mental illnesses, like schizophrenia and severe memory losses (Svrakic & et. al, 2012). Not to mention that those who use marijuana via inhalation of smoke do have higher health concern because smoking anything is never beneficial for the lungs

Supporters of legalization argue that much of the information and propaganda regarding marijuana is unfounded and misrepresents the plant.

Gateway Drug: The idea that marijuana is a “ gateway” drug is entirely a matter of view and conjecture. Could some people decide that marijuana alone is no longer providing them with the experience that they are craving, so they choose to find a stronger and more dangerous alternative? Of course, there are also plenty of marijuana users who have never even been in the same room with more illicit drugs, let alone using them. Marijuana does not encourage the use of other narcotic alternatives; it is really a matter of individual choice, be it positive or negative (Ratini, 2014).

More Marijuana on the Streets: The legalization of marijuana in states like Colorado and Washington will not necessarily increase the number of street sales of the substance will increase. However, in free-states, like Colorado, the number of street dealing is dropping, not increasing. Now that State supported clinics are required to verify the quality of the product that is sold to the public, there is less likelihood of being exposed to impure or tainted marijuana. Therefore limiting the street value of the drug and elevating it to a common, safer product (Smith, 2014).

Children: Regardless of legal status, no one is suggesting that marijuana being marketed to children. In fact, legalization will still allow specific age limits to be set; this will likely benefit the statistics of marijuana use by the underage. An illegal drug, dealers are not concerned with who they sell to, including little children. However, as a monitored and legitimate legalization is limiting underage usage of marijuana. This change is due to the legitimate

legal dispensaries will not sell to minors (Drug Policy Organization, 2014).

Health Risks: There have been a number of myths surrounding marijuana that many people have believed that have been fabricating or greatly exaggerated to prevent society from interacting with marijuana. Marijuana has been blamed for destroying short-term and long-term memory when used over a long period. In film and television we often see the stereotypical “ Stoner” character, which are slow in manner and speech, and cannot remember the things people tell them. However, there is no actual proof that marijuana directly affects any user’s memory loss. However, it is an association with mental disorders and diseases, like depression and schizophrenia, which is most misleading. If someone is depressed, in many cases, marijuana has been beneficial in improving the mind-set of people suffering from depression. Schizophrenia is a genetic condition; it cannot be caused by marijuana. Does this mean that someone with schizophrenia who partakes of marijuana will have very different, even negative reactions, which are typical due to their condition? The answer is yes. However, that speaks to the individual’s condition not to marijuana as a whole (Svrakic & et. al, 2012). As whole marijuana has greater potential to benefit many patients in many medicinal situations, it does not cause or directly encourage the development of any disease, disorder, or condition (Kleber, 2012).

SOLUTIONS

The only way to resolve the continuing arguments of the two opposing sides of the Cannabis issue is to find a common ground. It will be necessary for the

scientific, medical, and governmental agencies to do the research to determine the true effects, side effects, and genuine benefits so that everyone is on the same page. No more propaganda and societal myths about marijuana, the facts must prevail. That said this is the only path to successful change. As long as a large portion of the population continues to believe that all of the negative aspects of marijuana are true they are never going to be confident in its positive attributes. At the same time, those who support marijuana already believe that the plant is highly useful, has unending benefits, and is not the monster that years of propaganda have painted it to be; they will not be swayed. For this reason, the argument remains in a stand-off. However, feelings are continuing to change, even staunch political figure have come to accept the fact that the legalization of marijuana in the future is “inevitable” (McKay, 2014).

The decriminalization of marijuana will essentially pardon thousands marijuana user who were inappropriately incarcerated, that does not mean that those who have committed serious offenses while under the influence of marijuana, like any other legal substance, like alcohol are not freed for responsibility of their crimes. However, this change would dramatically impact the severe levels of prison overcrowding being experienced in the United States (Marijuana Policy Project, 2014). However, it is a boost to the economy hat legalizing marijuana at some level could become. Not only is the legalization going to create new businesses and jobs via dispensaries, they will, also, allow the states to profit from the tax revenue legal marijuana could develop (Evan, 2011). Both of which, are considered beneficial.

However, that does not mean that we can simply say, “Okay, it is legal, now

we can do whatever we want.” That is short-sided and would be perceived as abusing the privilege. There must be policies that decriminalize the use of marijuana, but that does not mean that there will be no overseeing or monitoring of the substance. Again, age limits should be established, the safety and quality regularly tested, and encouraging greater research to uncover the true potential outcomes. In order to find the solution and develop the future marijuana policies that are based on fact, not myth, and that allows those who option to use marijuana medicinally or recreational to benefit, while not infringing on the rights of those who option not to participate in marijuana use for any reason. For example, today we know that non-smokers should not be exposed to another’s second-hand smoke, specifically in enclosed places, when discussing cigarettes, however, the same controls should be encouraged for marijuana, simply, out of courtesy for non-smokers. Once we let go of the propaganda and commit to honest unbiased research, look for the best policies that acknowledge the needs, wants, and concerns of all sides, and allow marijuana to be seen for what it genuinely is, one way or the other.

CONCLUSION

Today, whether or not individuals have experience with marijuana, everyone seems to have an opinion on the issue of marijuana. Hence, why the topic of marijuana remains incredibly controversial and heatedly debated. Marijuana has had a long and varied history in the United States. Once it was a necessity, then a commodity, later a sign of wealth and prestige, used as a valued medicine, and then made an illegal. It was branded a dangerous

substance that should be banned and criminalized. It would seem that America is a bit “fickled” in its views on marijuana. A sad side-effect of the myths and wives-tales assigned attributed to marijuana. There is strong evidence to support that it does provide medicinal benefits to people suffering from an array of conditions. There is no evidence of many of the negative side effects that are often suggested. Finally, the public is changing its views and as they begin to gain more and more majority, which means that the government needs to take notice. It would appear that society may benefit from including marijuana as a legal alternative for medicinal and is representative of a substance less dangerous, addictive, and encourager of far worse long-term health effects. That said the solution to the marijuana issue in the United States will only be found in compromise and amiable policies that meet the concerns of all Americans on both sides of the argument.

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