



Legalize marijuana and reduce deaths from drug abuse

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It seems as if everyone has woken up to the problem of opioid abuse at once and wants to do something about it. In March, Politico assembled a working group to "confront the opioid epidemic." In May, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (D) announced the creation of a statewide heroin task force that he charged with ending the heroin and opioid crisis in the state. And in June, a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee approved a 93 percent increase in funding to combat opioid addiction nationwide.

The problem of opiate abuse is growing. There were an estimated 16,000 deaths caused by prescription opioid overdoses in 2010, the last year for which we have reliable data, three times as many who died in 1999. More people die from drug overdose each year as are killed by firearms.

As deaths from opioid abuse grow, the proposals to address this crisis have remained the same: Doctors should be more judicious about prescribing painkillers, governments should invest more in treatment facilities, and the courts should mete out stricter punishments for those who illegally sell these drugs. All of this, of course, is more or less what we've been doing the last five decades, with little success.

However, the data tell us that there is a possible deterrent to growing opioid addiction that has shown real promise: the wholesale legalization of marijuana.

Several states have made the drug legal in some form for over a decade — whether via medical marijuana or, more recently, the outright legalization of the drug — and the data generated from these state-level experiments suggests that the easier it is to acquire marijuana, the less opioid abuse there is. For instance, in 2014, researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center found that opioid overdose deaths decreased by nearly 25 percent in a state following the passage of medical marijuana laws.

A recently published study by the RAND Corporation also found a decrease in opioid addiction and overdoses in states with medical marijuana dispensaries. And last month, investigators at the University of Michigan published a retrospective survey of 244 patients suffering from chronic pain who frequented medical marijuana dispensaries and discovered that they frequently

substituted medical marijuana for opiates, with many of them judging medical marijuana as being more effective at treating chronic pain. Medical marijuana use was associated with a 64 percent decrease in opioid use, as well as a reduction in the amount and severity of the side effects of medications and an improved quality of life.

The downsides of marijuana legalization seem overstated: Evidence from Colorado's legalization efforts shows that consumption of marijuana by teenagers hasn't budged since the drug became legal there, for instance.

Chronic marijuana use may have some medical downsides, but they pale in comparison to harder drugs, or even tobacco, for that matter: A recent study suggested that smoking marijuana was less harmful to lungs than tobacco cigarettes.

It's hard to dispute that legalizing marijuana would reduce opiate abuse and save lives. There are other reasons to end its prohibition, but its role in solving what appears to be an otherwise intractable problem claiming thousands of lives a year seems like a compelling one.

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