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It's time to legalize recreational marijuana in Iowa and nationally

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Iowa should legalize recreational marijuana, and the federal government should eliminate barriers to marijuana recreational use as determined by the states. I am not advocating marijuana use any more than I advocated tobacco use in 2000 when I introduced in Congress a bipartisan bill to allow tobacco regulation by the Food and Drug Administration. That bill served as a guide for FDA regulation of tobacco.

There are many things to consider: health concerns, substance abuse, crime, road safety, economic outcomes, and budget impacts, among others.

A lengthy review of the literature on these aspects of legalization and a full discussion is beyond the scope of this op ed. For a more complete analysis I recommend "The Physicians' Case for Marijuana Legalization," American Journal of Public Health, 2017; "The Public Health Case for Legalizing Marijuana," National Affairs, Spring 2019; "The Effect of State Marijuana Legalizations: 2021 Update," Cato Institute, February 2021; "The Great Debate — Alcohol vs Marijuana," drugabuse.com, July, 2021; and "Is it Healthier to Smoke Weed or Drink Alcohol," MDLinx, June 2020. President Bill Clinton is famous for smoking weed but "not inhaling." President Barack Obama used marijuana frequently as an adolescent and in a New Yorker interview said, "I don't think marijuana is more dangerous than alcohol." I would take it further and say marijuana is less dangerous than alcohol, both acutely and long term.

Drinking alcohol can be fatal if too much is consumed too fast. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports 88,000 alcohol-related deaths annually; binge drinking accounted for half of these. It is estimated that one would have to smoke between 238 and 1,113 joints in a day to overdose on marijuana. A 2017 Drug Enforcement Administration report showed no deaths from marijuana overdose.

Alcohol consumption can harm the brain and most organs, including the heart, liver, and pancreas. It increases the risk of many cancers, puts fetal development at risk, and compromises the immune system — important in dealing with COVID-19. Alcohol abuse is the leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. and causes mental health problems. Its addiction potential is well known, and it is most addicting in adolescence.

Pot isn't harmless, but alcohol seems clearly worse

Marijuana isn't harmless. It has been associated with altered brain development in adolescent frequent users. There is an association between daily cannabis use in teens and increased anxiety and depression, although it is difficult to determine which comes first.

The effect of alcohol on memory in alcoholics is well known, affecting both short- and long-term memory. Adolescent alcohol use has been shown to inhibit and alter normal brain development, particularly in the prefrontal cortex, which then predisposes a person to adult use disorders. Studies are inconclusive about how much marijuana use causes impairment to learning. Anecdotally, I have seen daily use of marijuana change people to be so "laid back" that they lose the drive to be as successful as they could be; they no longer care.

Marijuana is much less addictive than opiates when used for management of pain and can replace Advil or Aleve. There is no association of marijuana with cancer. Long-term, frequent use of marijuana can cause a vomiting disorder.

I can find no evidence that marijuana use increases crime. A study on marijuana use and intimate partner violence found that couples who used marijuana were less likely to be violent. Men who use marijuana are least likely to commit an act of violence against a spouse.

Driving while stoned is safer than driving drunk, but marijuana still increased the odds of being in a car accident by 83%, according to Columbia University research. Compare this with alcohol use, which increases the odds of being in a car accident by more than 2,200%. Alcohol causes more than 3,500 accidental deaths per year in individuals younger than 21. Lesson: Don't drive under the influence of either marijuana or alcohol, and especially if both are in your system.

Both marijuana and alcohol can have bad health effects, but I see marijuana as the lesser risk, with a glaring exception: Street marijuana is unregulated for strength and purity.

Legal marijuana sales are more safe

In contrast, the many states that have legalized recreational marijuana regulate the product sold in their "dispensaries." One can be reasonably assured that one is not buying marijuana adulterated by cocaine, methamphetamine or, especially, fentanyl which can kill quickly. The THC dosages of the legal products are labeled, allowing one to better titrate the effect. The products are sold in child-proof containers.

Legal sales cut off the connection between the illicit drug pusher offering other, more dangerous drugs. Legal tax proceeds to the state can be used for educational activities to reduce adolescent use. There should be educational materials provided on purchase with warnings, just as one receives with drug prescriptions. Continuing research on the harmful effects and safety of marijuana should be funded.

The effects on the economy and jobs from legalization have been marginal, with mild improvement following legalization in Colorado, Oregon, Washington, Nevada and Alaska. Undisputedly, though, marijuana legalization has significantly increased state tax revenue. Colorado collects almost \$20 million per month from recreational marijuana alone. Illinois took in over \$200 million in tax revenue last year from marijuana and is looking at surpassing \$1 billion in sales this year, probably not a little of which comes from neighboring states such as Iowa.

The revenue coming from the legalization of marijuana is enticing to many but should be of secondary importance to health considerations. However, I recommend legalization because I think it is comparatively safe if it is regulated in various ways, such as age of purchase, times sold, and with penalties for abuse as is done with alcohol.

Finally, I think there is a good case for both conservatives and liberals to support state legalization of recreational marijuana. Marijuana criminalization ties up police resources, finances criminals who push other more dangerously addictive drugs, and fills our courts and jails. It has created racial injustices, as minorities are disproportionately jailed for marijuana use even though white Americans use the drug as often.

It is also time for Congress to take marijuana off the restrictive Schedule I controlled substances list.