



Marijuana Debunked: the case against legalization

Ed Gogek
September 17, 2015

*The legalise marijuana movement has some powerful backers and is making political gains. But Arizona addiction psychiatrist **Dr Ed Gogek**, who used the drug himself in his youth but has treated over 10,000 addicts and alcoholics during his medical career, insists that legalization would have seriously harmful consequences for teenagers and society. To arm “parents, pundits and politicians” to fight this move he has written a handbook setting out the scientific case against recreational use of marijuana by teenagers, whose brains are still developing. In this interview with MercatorNet he touches on some of the themes.*

MercatorNet: Many responsible and productive citizens – including yourself – admit to smoking marijuana in the past, many, perhaps, while at university. What is the evidence that it does lasting harm to young people?

Dr Gogek: An article published in *Current Addiction Reports* listed dozens of studies showing that marijuana damages the still-developing teenage brain. The brains of teens who smoke pot have less gray matter, more disorganized white matter, and disrupted blood flow. Dozens of structural changes show up on brain scans, and these changes are linked to less ability to think and plan, more impulsivity, poor attention, and worse memory. Teenage marijuana users think more slowly and process less. And most of this damage is permanent; even if they later stop using marijuana, their brain function does not return to normal.

The most serious finding is an average loss of eight IQ points in addicted teenage users, of which there are at least a half million in the U.S. Losing eight IQ points could mean someone born with the mental agility to do well in community college who is instead struggling, someone who should have been promoted at work but is instead passed over, or someone who was once capable of doctoral work who instead has an average white collar job. These are huge changes, but the person might never realize what marijuana has cost him. It’s nearly impossible for an individual to see his own subtle brain damage.

School work suffers terribly from marijuana use. Research shows that teenagers who use regularly before age sixteen drop out of school at more than twice the rate of non-users. A quarter of all marijuana users start this young.

A research project by the University of Maryland School of Public Health followed university freshmen for ten years. According to one of the authors, substance abuse, "especially marijuana use," was linked to "college students skipping more classes, spending less time studying, earning lower grades, dropping out, and being unemployed after college."

As adults, former teenage marijuana users earn less, are more likely to spend time unemployed or on welfare, and are less happy with their lives and their relationships. Teenage marijuana users have less ability to experience pleasure for the rest of their lives. No parent wants this for their children.

I first got stoned at age seventeen, and used regularly, sometimes daily, until quitting at nineteen. After I quit, I knew my mind was fuzzier than it had been two years earlier. I still did well in school, but something was subtly different. I kept waiting for it to clear so I'd again have the sharp, incisive thinking I had in high school, but it never did, and I forgot about it. I realize now that I didn't simply cloud my mind with marijuana, I permanently altered the microstructure of my brain. That crisp, clear thinking wasn't waiting to return once the drug got out of my system; it was gone forever. I can't speak with certainty for the adolescent I used to be, but if I'd known then what researchers are learning about marijuana today, I might never have touched it.

Adolescents also tend to drink a lot of alcohol now, yet alcohol is a legal substance and can be legally purchased in some countries by 18 year olds. Isn't binge drinking just as risky for this age group as pot?

That's right. Alcohol causes more harm to teens than any other drug, not because it is worse, but because it's legal and widely used. So why would we compound the problem by legalizing another addictive drug?

Alcohol is legal because it was deeply ingrained in society long before we recognized how harmful it is. If it were invented today, we'd ban it as quickly as we've banned spice and bath salts and every new drug to come along.

One of the pro-marijuana talking points that has been proved false is their claim that teens find it easier to get marijuana than alcohol because sales clerks card while drug dealers don't. But research shows that the more legal a drug is, the easier it is for teenagers to obtain.

When Monitoring the Future surveyed tenth graders, 80 percent said they could get alcohol which is totally legal, 70 percent said they could get marijuana which is quasi-legal in today's society, but only ten percent knew how to get crystal meth or heroin which are still strictly illegal. Any time we loosen our marijuana laws, we make the drug more available and teen use increases.

Alcohol shows us that there is no way to legalize a drug for adults without causing an epidemic of teenage use. The harm it does to teens should be a warning about what happens when we legalize any addictive drug.

There's a very popular TED talk going the rounds on Youtube, in which British journalist Johann Hari argues that drug addiction is really an adaptation to missing social connections and meaningful activity, and that society should be trying to provide these things for addicts rather than criminalizing drugs and fighting addiction. What do you think of that argument?

Like many people who are pro-legalization, Hari is ignoring the science of addiction. This is actually a common type of denial. People who want to continue to drink or use drugs often refuse to accept the research showing that addiction is a biological illness. Addicts and alcoholics in denial especially dislike twelve-step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous.

However, there is a huge amount of research showing that addiction is a biological and often a genetic illness. And nothing has been shown to work as well as the 12-step programs. .

What Hari is doing is also inhumane. Millions of people are addicted to drugs and alcohol, and are very miserable as a result. Hari is telling them to ignore treatment that's been shown to work, and instead to get treatment with much less evidence base. If someone spoke this way about any other disease he'd be severely criticized, and deservedly so. Imagine telling someone with a broken leg not to get it set or telling someone with epilepsy not to take anti-seizure medicine.

Hari is right that a well-connected, happy, meaningful life is very important for preventing substance abuse. But once the disease of addiction develops, it requires real treatment.

Is there a reasonable case for decriminalization of this drug? What would be the downside?

I used to support decriminalization, but data on the countries that have decriminalized marijuana have convinced me otherwise. In 2013, UNICEF issued a report ranking 29 rich countries on several demographics, including teenage marijuana use. Of the fourteen countries with the highest rates of teen use, all but three had decriminalized marijuana. Of the fifteen countries with the least teen use, only three had decriminalization.

And even these three countries still had strict laws. For example, Portugal has decriminalized drug possession, but people are still arrested for possession. Instead of jail, they go before a commission that can impose other sanctions if they refuse to cooperate with treatment. There's no tolerance for drug abuse.

Sweden is my favorite model for a country with a sound drug policy. It has some of the strictest marijuana laws in the world. The country's policy is zero tolerance for drug use. But it doesn't lock users up. Most drug offenders get probation and treatment. Tough drug laws are used for prevention, not punishment.

In the United States, tough drug laws are often used the same way, to get substance abusers into treatment. Drug courts are the best and most successful example. Most addicts hate the idea of treatment and fight it tooth and nail. Drug courts keep them clean and sober long enough to realize they are happier that way. The marijuana lobby says drug use is a victimless crime and should be decriminalized. But when we weaken our drugs laws, we make it harder to get substance abusers into treatment.

It's important to get them into treatment because substance abusers don't just commit drug crimes, they also commit most of the violent and property crimes. Crime in America is mostly a symptom of substance abuse. The number one aim of our criminal justice system should be to get addicted criminals into treatment, and tough drug laws make that possible.

By the way, in Sweden only 5 percent of teens under age sixteen use marijuana. In the U.S., it's 22 percent. The United States has mass incarceration; Sweden has closed four prisons over the past decade because they are no longer needed. Tough drug laws apparently prevent teen use and prevent crime.

Is the drive to legalize marijuana really a push to legalize all drugs?

Yes. Two groups funded by George Soros, the Drug Policy Alliance and the Global Commission on Drug Policy, have both called for the decriminalization of all drugs. They've openly admitted that their plan is to pass medical marijuana laws, then legalize marijuana, and then decriminalize or legalize all drugs. The Cato Institute and the *Economist* support the legalization of all drugs.

There is no better example of the overwhelming power of billionaires to control the political process and take the country in a bad direction than this drive to legalize drugs. Democrats won't speak out against it because they're too beholden to George Soros. Republicans won't make it a major issue because many wealthy libertarian donors, such as the Koch brothers, support legalization. The Koch brothers founded the Cato Institute, which now wants to legalize heroin. Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders has made opposition to money in politics one of the main planks in his campaign, but even he hasn't spoken out against the billionaires who used their money to legalize marijuana and other drugs.

And legalization of all drugs would be truly disastrous. Use, abuse and addiction to all drugs would increase, and so would nearly every social problem because they are all caused, at least in part, by drug abuse.

Here are twenty social problems that would get worse if we legalized all drugs: Five violent problems are mostly caused by substance abuse--crime, including gang violence and prison overcrowding, along with child abuse and domestic violence. Six economic problems caused at least partially by substance abuse are homelessness, chronic unemployment, poverty, welfare dependency, school dropouts and higher health care costs. The four family problems more common among drug abusers are divorce, deadbeat dads, single moms and grandparents forced to raise their grandkids. Four sex-related problems greatly rooted in substance abuse are teen pregnancy, abortion, HIV and prostitution. Lastly, there's drunk and drugged driving.

Substance abuse truly is modern society's Pandora's box. If we legalize all drugs, which is where the country is heading, all twenty of these problems will get much worse.

One of your aims is to educate parents on the dangers of teenage marijuana use. In what ways can parents use their influence to fight this drug?

My number one recommendation for parents is to contact their elected representatives and those running for office and tell them they want a candidate who opposes loosening marijuana laws in any way. The evidence is very strong that when we relax marijuana laws, teenage use goes up. While a strong parent-child bond is the best defense against risky behavior, it is no match for a society that accepts and promotes drug use.

If the drug is legalized, the marijuana industry will use its advertising power to entice teenagers the same way the tobacco and alcohol industries have. Parents should tell politicians they want marijuana strictly illegal, and they want all legalization and medical marijuana laws overturned, because they do not want their kids using drugs. They should tell politicians that anyone who speaks in favor of legalization, decriminalization or medical marijuana laws is promoting teenage drug use and will not get their vote. There is no better way to protect adolescents.

Dr. Ed Gogek is an addiction psychiatrist who, in thirty years of practice, has treated over 10,000 addicts and alcoholics in mental health centers, private practice, prisons, homeless shelters, and many substance abuse treatment programs. His writing has appeared in the New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, Philadelphia Inquirer, and USA Today, among other national media outlets.