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Friday, September 18, 2009

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TierneyLab

Putting Ideas in Science to the Test



September 18, 2009, 12:38 pm

Drug Science, 1937-2009

By [John Tierney](#)

New York Magazine's [article on marijuana](#) includes an interesting bit of scientific history. After noting that Mayor Bloomberg has presided over more marijuana arrests than any mayor anywhere, Mark Jacobson writes:

This could be compared with the record of another New York City mayor, Fiorello La Guardia, who, in response to the 1937 federal ban on pot, requested a report by the New York Academy of Medicine, which concluded that, contrary to . . . [the F.B.I.'s] claim that pot was an “assassin of youth,” marijuana was not medically addictive; not under the control of a single organized group; did not lead to morphine, heroin, or cocaine addiction; and was not the determining factor in the commission of major crimes, and that “publicity concerning the catastrophic effects of marihuana smoking in New York is unfounded.”

Some things never seem to change. When Portugal decriminalized drug use in 2001, there were dire predictions of a surge in addiction and a plague of social problems. But eight years later, consider some of the numbers in [the Economist's article](#) on Portugal's experiment. Citing reports from Portuguese officials as well as [a study from the Cato Institute](#) by Robert Greenwald, the Economist says that use of illegal drugs in Portugal has generally declined since decriminalization, and that the emphasis on treatment rather than incarceration has reduced harm to addicts. Here's an excerpt from the article:

Officials believe that, by lifting fears of prosecution, the policy has encouraged addicts to seek treatment. This bears out their view that criminal sanctions are not the best answer. “Before decriminalization, addicts were afraid to seek treatment because they feared they would be denounced to the police and arrested,” says Manuel Cardoso, deputy director of the Institute for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Portugal's main drugs-prevention and drugs-policy agency. “Now they know they will be treated as patients with a problem and not stigmatized as criminals.”

The number of addicts registered in drug-substitution programs has risen from 6,000 in 1999 to over 24,000 in 2008, reflecting a big rise in treatment (but not in drug use). Between 2001 and 2007 the number of Portuguese who say they have taken heroin at least once in their lives increased from just 1% to 1.1%. For most other drugs, the figures have fallen: Portugal has one of Europe's lowest lifetime usage rates for cannabis. And most notably, heroin and other drug abuse has decreased among vulnerable younger age-groups, according to Mr Cardoso.

The share of heroin users who inject the drug has also fallen, from 45% before decriminalization to 17% now, he says, because the new law has facilitated treatment and harm-reduction programs. Drug addicts now account for only 20% of Portugal's HIV cases, down from 56% before. “We no longer have to work under the paradox that exists in many countries of providing support and medical care to people the law considers criminals.”

Now that Mexico, as [my colleague Mark Lacey reports](#), has decriminalized the possession of small amounts of marijuana, cocaine, heroin and drugs, what can we expect there? And what about the United States? Roger Parloff argues in [Fortune](#) that the Obama administration's pledge not to interfere with medical marijuana “potentially achieves for that intoxicant what the Twenty-First Amendment accomplished for beer, wine and booze” — essentially ceding regulation to the states. What effect would that have on public health?

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1. September 18, 2009 1:43 pm [Link](#)

I think pot is a good thing. It is way safer and causes a lot less problems than alcohol. The only way we've been able to keep it criminal is by lying about it, and that is the simple fact of the matter. It's stupid.

All prohibition does is give opportunity to organized crime. Drug money is legalized all the time by governments; furthermore, international banks are always laundering the money. Why not create a regulated industry, which produces safer drugs, and creates a better socialization for drugs.

We do live in a drug culture. Drugs are everywhere. Therefore, prohibition legitimizes corruption in society, because drugs are everywhere, but they are also against the law. Nobody really wants, or really expects to get rid of drugs.

And I'm not saying methamphetamine should be sold in K-mart. But people use amphetamines all the time without cooking shit up in their basement. If coke was legal and cheaper, would we have such a big problem with crack?

I'm not pro-drug, I'm pro choice. I definitely think all natural entheogens, including marijuana, should be legal, even for personal cultivation. With other drugs, it is a tough question, but I think it would just be a safer—though not perfect—system. People have discretion, especially when they're educated; just because addicts can get access to heroine, it doesn't socialize the drug.

I personally don't think amphetamines have done me too bad when I've needed them, and they used to be sold over the counter. They are psychologically addictive and have physical repercussions, but it is not socially acceptable to be a speed ball. Some will be, but that's how it's going to be anyway.

Cocaine is a bad drug, but at the same time, it isn't so bad that we need this system around it. The worst thing about cocaine is that it is illegal. I'm not proud of it, but I have experienced things, and I know people do get out of control, but this whole thing is completely out of control. Lots of people do cocaine recreationally and function just fine.

So in conclusion, legalize!

— *Michael Edwards*

2. 2. September 18, 2009 1:43 pm [Link](#)

I no longer believe, as I did when I was young, that marijuana is harmless. In particular, there's now strong evidence that even moderate pot use can cause schizophrenia in people with certain genes, people who would not otherwise develop that life-destroying disease. That's a pretty high price to pay for this trivial drug.

That being said, I can see no justification for not decriminalizing it. I've never known anybody who didn't smoke it because it was illegal, indeed, for rebellious teenagers, the fact that it's forbidden is one of its attractions. And law enforcement efforts notwithstanding, it's always been readily available. Criminal penalties merely waste money and impose punishments that often do more harm than the drug itself. And they create an isolated, mistrustful drug culture that rejects legitimate warnings about the effects of drug use, or, as the article points out, treatment for those who are in over their heads.

— *Josh Hill*

3. 3. September 18, 2009 1:51 pm [Link](#)

stoners please give us your insight...

— *alexis*

4. 4. September 18, 2009 1:52 pm [Link](#)

There seems to be a persistent and growing tendency to underestimate the degree of legal (and personal physical and financial) jeopardy that remains to users or distributors of medical cannabis, to say nothing of any other cannabis aficionados.

Despite state law providing legal access to medical cannabis in most counties of California a person still faces arrest for possession even when all proper documentation since the opinion of most county sheriffs is that at best state law simply offers the patient a defense to try in court, not protection against arrest, incarceration, and confiscation and destruction of personal property.

Further, having the legal right to use medical cannabis in California does not protect a worker from being fired for having a positive cannabis test. The Republican governor vetoed a bill that would have specifically banned this obvious violation of the employee rights.

Blatant disregard for the law exists at the federal level also. Pure THC (Marinol) is a Schedule III drug. Under DEA regulations a composition that has a lower concentration of a Schedule III drug would be scheduled no higher than IV, or more likely Schedule V - the lowest classification. It is only through flagrantly ignoring its own rules that the DEA keeps cannabis (never higher than about 20% THC in natural form) as Schedule I.

— *Carey*

5. 5. September 18, 2009 2:23 pm [Link](#)

Very interesting.

One point that seems to need to be made in light of the use of the word “just”:

Some may think an increase from 1.0% to 1.1% is just a 0.1% increase; but it’s actually a ten-percent increase.

— *Smadaf*

6. 6. September 18, 2009 2:24 pm [Link](#)

dont wait around for serious drug consequences but get out

— *jeff stayton*

7. 7. September 18, 2009 2:25 pm [Link](#)

Your Economist link is miswritten, by the way.

John: Thanks for the alert. It’s been fixed.

— *Smadaf*

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About TierneyLab



John Tierney always wanted to be a scientist but went into journalism because its peer-review process was a great deal easier to sneak through. Now a columnist for the Science Times section, Tierney previously wrote columns for the Op-Ed page, the Metro section and the Times Magazine. Before that he covered science for magazines like Discover, Hippocrates and Science 86.

With your help, he's using TierneyLab to check out new research and rethink conventional wisdom about science and society. The Lab's work is guided by two founding principles:

1. Just because an idea appeals to a lot of people doesn't mean it's wrong.
2. But that's a good working theory.

Comments and suggestions are welcome, particularly from researchers with new findings. E-mail tierneylab@nytimes.com.



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here's a chance to win a prize with by taking a new astronomy quiz, complete with some gorgeous images that are part of an exhibit celebrating the 400th anniversary of Galileo's observations with a telescope.

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