Cannabis legislation: An addiction physician’s perspective

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Senate Committee
April 16, 2018
Introduction

• It is an honour and privilege to present to this Senate Committee
• I have practiced addiction medicine in Toronto for 34 years
• I am also actively involved in policy and medical education
• I, and many of my colleagues, have serious concerns about the impact of this legislation on public health
• I will briefly summarize these concerns and propose some solutions
Cannabis use will increase

• With legalization, cannabis will be:
  • Easier to obtain
  • Inexpensive ($10/gram)
  • More socially acceptable
  • Perceived as safe by the public
Legalization will expand the black market

- Illicit market will increase, both for 18+ market and in youth < 18
- 18-year-olds will sell to 17-year-olds
  - 17-year-olds will pay more for high-quality cannabis of known potency
- Illicitly grown cannabis will decline in price to compete with the market for legally purchased cannabis
  - Cannabis is very easy to grow
- In California, medical marijuana card holders were major source of cannabis for youth entering treatment for cannabis use disorder
- Illicit opioid use dramatically expanded when prescription opioids became readily available
Cannabis use before & after legalization  
Colorado college students (n=5,421)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Cannabis use before legalization</th>
<th>Cannabis use after legalization</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age &gt; 21</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>61%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age &lt; 21</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>53%</td>
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Cannabis-related harms will increase

- Harms of cannabis increase with increases in population use
- This is true for all substances (alcohol, opioids, tobacco)
- Adolescent ED visits for cannabis-related harms (mainly psychiatric), Colorado before and after legalization:
  - 1.8 per 1,000 visits in 2009 to 4.9 per 1,000 visits in 2015 ($p = < .0001$)
- Use of opioids, cocaine and other drugs could increase as well
  - Patients with cannabis use disorder tend to also use alcohol and other drugs

- Wang et al, J Adolescent Health 2018
Suggestions for change:
Increase the legal limit from 18 to 25 years

• This will slow the increase in cannabis use among youth < 25 years
  • The 18–25 year age group can’t purchase cannabis legally, or sell legally purchased cannabis to youth < 18
  • The black market will not lower its price to compete for the 18–25 year old market

• Youth < 25 are at high risk of cannabis-related harms
  • Psychosis, cannabis use disorder, poor school performance etc.
  • The brain is still developing until age 24
  • Cannabis may cause permanent deficits when smoked regularly during adolescence
Limit the amount and potency of cannabis

- Harms of cannabis are related to amount and potency (percent THC)
- Current law allows for purchase of up to 30 grams at a time, with no limit on potency
- Companies are selling products containing as much as 25% THC
- In the 60’s, cannabis contained 3% THC on average
- The new high potency cannabis is a drug not a plant
Limit the amount and potency of cannabis (2)

- Someone who purchases 30 grams per week of 25% THC likely has a cannabis use disorder, and/or is selling the cannabis

- Possible limits:
  - 15 grams for a single purchase
  - Maximum 18% THC
  - Higher cost for higher THC (Similar to higher cost for bottle of whiskey vs. bottle of beer)
Reduce the penalties for selling cannabis

- Selling could result in large fine and jail time of 3 years
- This is far out of proportion to the crime
  - 3 years in jail for selling a legal product
- Will destroy young people’s lives and will not stop the black market
Summary

• This legislation will increase cannabis use and cannabis-related harms among youth

• These harms can be mitigated by:
  • Increasing the legal age to 25 years of age
  • Limiting the amount purchased at one time
  • Limiting the potency of THC sold
  • Reducing the penalties for cannabis selling