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Big Marijuana: Big Deal?



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Peterson

I did not anticipate being immersed in the public policy debate over legalizing marijuana before I became Attorney General. However, once I took office, three things made marijuana a front-and-center issue: Nebraska filed a lawsuit against Colorado; a bill was introduced to legalize medical marijuana; and another bill was introduced that minimized the penalties for the possession of marijuana edibles. Soon, I found myself reading numerous medical articles and mental health studies, to gain an understanding of exactly what the future impact could be on Nebraskans. I was specifically concerned about the potential harm to our young people.

In Colorado there are over 1,000 licensed retail marijuana businesses. Multiple news outlets have reported that nationwide, in 2015 alone, the recreational pot industry made over \$5.4 billion. The industry is very creative, marketing its marijuana products in not only natural leaf form, but also edible products such as candy bars, pixie sticks, gummy bears, cookies and power drinks. They use product names like Kushy Punch, Monkey Bar, Orange Kush Soda, Dixie Rolls, Ganja Joy, and Cheeta Chews. It is obvious that the industry is targeting a very young market and it's working. Their efforts have been successful. Data compiled by the Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area shows that marijuana used in Colorado was 55 percent above the national average among teens and young adults. According to recent data collected in Colorado, the highest age bracket for the entry into the use of marijuana is the range of age 10 to 14. The National Institute on Drug Abuse reports that high school students are more likely to use marijuana than any other illegal drug. 36.4 percent of 12th graders have tried marijuana and 29.8 percent of 10th graders had experimented with marijuana. Not surprisingly, these percentages are notably higher in states that have either medical marijuana laws or recreational marijuana laws.

Not only is the marijuana industry creative in their marketing forms, the industry recognizes that the true commercial value of their product is found in its strong potency. The commercial market is producing the strongest THC potency seen in the world. The 2014 High Times reported 15 strains of cannabis plants with a Delta 9 THC strength factor of 23 percent. (Delta 9 THC produces the high.) The top cannabis plants tested in 2015 and reported by High Times were over 25 percent THC. In com-

parison, the standard THC factor prior to the Colorado open market was typically below 8 percent. This degree of strong potency has made the Colorado product extremely popular in markets outside of Colorado. In 2015, law enforcement reported that Colorado marijuana had been exported to at least 36 states.

In the last year, I have traveled to dozens of counties throughout Nebraska meeting with law enforcement and prosecutors to better understand some of the criminal issues they are dealing with. During those trips, I have spoken to students in as many high schools as possible. Typically, I will speak to an assembly or a government class. During those meetings we will commonly discuss marijuana. In speaking with several school administrators, they tell me they believe legalization of marijuana in Colorado has had a significant impact on how students view the use of marijuana. Administrators explain that it is common for students to minimize the effect of marijuana based on the fact that if it were dangerous it would not have been legalized in Colorado. Students are also aware that the penalties in Nebraska are more severe for a minor in possession of alcohol than they are for the infractions issued for the possession of marijuana, so it must not be that big of a deal.

What is most disturbing about the marijuana industry is how it unabashedly targets these young people. From a business profit model it makes sense, you go after the young people as quickly as possible to turn them into early users of the product and then they will continue to use into adulthood. Does that sound familiar? Do you remember Joe Camel? We despised the fact that big tobacco used our young people in this manner, the problem is that when it comes to the marijuana industry and the potency of the product, the potential harm to young people is so much more. If the marijuana industry is targeting our youth, it is imperative that we as adults fully understand the risk of harm caused by marijuana.

According to a study done by Northwestern University/Harvard Medical School, MRI studies confirmed that casual marijuana use did cause structural harm to the brain. The study was done using casual marijuana users versus nonusers in the age range of 18 to 25. The MRI test showed "Significant shape differences were detected in the left nucleus accumbens and right amygdala" of those

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who were recreational users. These shape differences were specifically found in brain regions associated with emotion and motivation. Co-Senior study author, Hans Breiter, M.D., commented, "This study raises a strong challenge to the idea that casual marijuana use isn't associated with bad consequences."

Equally concerning is the long-term impact on young people's mental health. Numerous studies have confirmed that the impact of regular THC exposure on an adolescent brain makes them more susceptible to serious mental health conditions such as anxiety disorder and schizophrenia. The state of Nebraska and many other states are currently in a poor position to properly address many mental health issues that face our communities. As far as social cost, it's difficult to understand the progressive logic of legalizing recreational drugs when it is undisputed that such usage will only exacerbate our current mental health treatment crisis.

Both medical and psychiatry associations have evaluated the impact of marijuana on young people and have taken strong positions in opposition to legislation for recreational use. In 2015, the American College of Pediatrics issued a report setting forth several medical concerns regarding marijuana usage by adolescents. They noted the damage caused to the lungs, to the brain, and particularly the risk caused to the mental health of regular marijuana users. In the report it noted:

"In chronic adolescent users, marijuana's adverse impact on learning and memory persists long after the acute effects of the drug wear off. A major study published in 2012 in Proceedings of the National Academy of Science, provides objective evidence that marijuana is harmful to the adolescent brain."

The college also noted an extensive study regarding marijuana's impact on IQ. Participants started in the study at age 13 and were given their final IQ test at age 38. The participants who used


cannabis heavily in their teens continued through adulthood, showing a significant drop in IQ between ages 13 and 38. The study was considered notable because it tested 1,000 individuals before the first use of marijuana and then had a significant time period to measure the impact over 20-plus years. Additionally, in 2014, The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry came out strongly against any legislation legalizing marijuana, noting that:

"Marijuana's deleterious effects on adolescent brain development, cognition, and social functioning may have immediate and long term implications, including increased risk for motor vehicle accidents, sexual victimization, academic failure, lasting decline in intelligence measures, psychopathology, addiction, and psychological and occupational impairment."

Obviously, you do not hear the marijuana industry reporting this information. In order to have continued success, it is imperative for this industry to do everything it can to legitimize its business model, and convince most people that marijuana is not harmful. Just like any other free market enterprise, the impairment industry is retaining well-recognized lobbying groups, attempting to associate with legitimate business interests, and engaging the services of former law enforcement officials to give the perception that they are "doing it the right way." In order to expand a multibillion-dollar business, it's critical that the industry spend millions of dollars to create the illusion of legitimacy to persuade all Americans that a legal marijuana market "is really not that big of a deal."

As Nebraskans, we care deeply about our youth and the safety of our communities. Because we understand the serious risk that these potent marijuana products pose to our students, it will be imperative that we all work together to prevent our youth from being consumed by the marijuana industry. It is the only responsible response. In short, we need to make students aware that it is a big deal both for today and for their future.

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