

Guest opinion: Marijuana not harmless for everyone

By Ann Clark

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Activists in Colorado are hoping to legalize marijuana for recreational use in November, claiming that it is "safer than alcohol." While many people smoke marijuana with little adverse effect, there is evidence that it is psychologically harmful to a small portion of the population.

Researchers have found that some individuals with a personal or a family history of mental illness are at an increased risk of severe psychological damage from using marijuana, and teenagers and young adults in this group are particularly vulnerable, as marijuana causes changes in their rapidly developing brain functions. Studies show that the younger the age of use, the greater the risk of psychosis. However, at this time there is no way of determining with any certainty which individuals have a predisposition to a severe reaction.

I believed that marijuana was harmless. I voted in favor of medical marijuana in 2000, and I voted to decriminalize the use of it in November 2006. One month after that last election I changed my mind when I saw the devastation that it caused in my son. I tell his story in hopes of keeping another family from tragedy.

Six years ago my son Brant was a senior in high school in Boulder. He was a healthy, happy, bright and normal teenager, and he planned to attend CU upon graduation. In December 2006 he went to a party, smoked a lot of marijuana, and experienced a sudden, major psychotic break. No other drug was involved, and the marijuana was not "laced" with anything. The next morning he was distraught and told me that he believed that a terrifying change in his mental state had occurred while smoking pot, and it had irreparably damaged him. He lost all hope for the future, felt a deep emptiness and became irrational with psychosis. The changes were so intense that in less than three days time he required hospitalization, medication and therapy, but at the end of three weeks he took his own life.

While my son's experience with marijuana is not typical, it is also not isolated. Psychosis may develop gradually or suddenly. Marijuana has been known to trigger an episode of mental illness (cyber.law.harvard.edu/evidence/99/marijuana/Health_1.html). People experiencing the onset of psychosis are much more likely to commit suicide.

Worldwide studies from the United States, United Kingdom, Ireland, Australia, France, Germany, Sweden and the Netherlands, to name a few, are reporting marijuana/cannabis use as a likely risk factor in the development of psychosis in susceptible individuals. Unfortunately, this association between marijuana and psychosis receives very little attention in the U.S. media, and is often ridiculed by those wanting legalization.

According to a 2010 study by Marie-Odile Krebs at the National Institute of Health and Medical Research laboratory in France, people differ greatly on their sensitivity to marijuana. Of 190 high risk patients (121 of whom had used cannabis), "researchers found a subgroup of 44 whose disease was powerfully affected by the drug. These patients either developed schizophrenia within a month of beginning to smoke pot or saw their existing psychosis severely exacerbated with each successive exposure to the drug." (Time, July 2010)

Besides the usual arguments against marijuana -- that it is a "gateway" drug, can be addictive, cause physiological damage and can lead to a lack of motivation -- please consider the information that there is a potential for it to bring on psychotic illness in those with a genetic predisposition. Until a test or other clear, reliable guideline is developed to identify these individuals, we would be well-advised to wait on making marijuana even more available. Around 44 percent of high school students have used marijuana, and legalizing it would only lead to an even lower perception of harm. When going to the polls this November and voting on Amendment 64, the legalization of marijuana for recreational use, please vote "no."

Ann Clark lives in Boulder.