

Valdez: Maybe legal marijuana isn't such a good idea

By Linda Valdez

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I used to support full marijuana legalization.

I have nagging doubts these days.

Arizona's medical marijuana law is a farce that's disproportionately used by young men who claim more pain than their years would justify in order to gain a steady supply of high.

Chronic pain is the ailment of choice for 80 percent of Arizona "patients" with medical marijuana cards, according to the Arizona Department of Health Services. Sure. Some of them may be legitimate. But 80 percent?

There are two ways to look at this. Either the desire to get high is so strong that Arizona should acquiesce and legalize marijuana for recreational use by adults.

Or we should avoid compounding the medical marijuana mistake.

The wrong lesson from Prohibition

I used to argue that legalization is a rational acknowledgement that Prohibition didn't work for alcohol so we should stop trying to make it work for marijuana.

But anti-marijuana warrior Sheila Polk says we are taking the wrong lesson from Prohibition.

"What we learned from Prohibition is that it is difficult to take away something that is legal," says Polk, the Yavapai County Attorney who has been actively opposing efforts to legalize recreational use of marijuana in Arizona.

If Arizona legalizes recreational marijuana, it will be "difficult to get the cat back in the bag," she says. But that's exactly what we may want to do.

According to Polk, legal pot in Colorado led to increased teen use and a thriving black market to serve underage users and those who want to skirt the taxes on legal pot.

Today's pot is more potent

She says “edibles” have enhanced THC content way above the “Oh, wow!” days of my youth.

Efforts to escalate the high are predictable when you legalize “making money from an addictive product,” Polk says.

Sure. People have been seeking ways to get high for millennia, but legalizing marijuana is not the same as repealing Prohibition.

Alcohol was legal, widely used and commonly accepted before Prohibition. The same is not true of marijuana.

It continues to carry the taint – and counter-culture glamour – of being an illegal substance. You can have a glass of wine at Grandma’s Thanksgiving table. Passing around marijuana cookies is a different matter.

Consequences of smoking yourself stupid

Making marijuana fully legal for adults represents a major step and a significant validation of use.

I really don’t care if adults want to smoke themselves stupid. But don't forget: We all pay a price for layabouts and bad parents.

What’s more, I don’t want to send kids the message that smoking pot is the harmless.

It’s not.

Arizona doesn’t have to release the cat now. We can wait and see how things play out in Colorado and other states that are trying the legalization experiment.

Outlasting one initiative

Polk is confident this year’s recreational pot effort can be defeated.

Her work with Arizonans for Responsible Drug Policy outlasted one of two initiatives that aimed to get Arizona voters to legalize pot this November.

One group, The Campaign to Regulate Marijuana Like Alcohol, has more than \$1 million in donations and is expected to make the ballot with a measure that legalizes recreational pot for adults.

It limits the number of places where pot can be sold and gives those who are currently selling medical marijuana what Polk calls a “monopoly” with enduring “competitive advantages.”

An odd ally this year

Another initiative pushed by Arizonans for Mindful Regulation, was withdrawn when it failed to get enough signatures to qualify for the ballot, according to Capitol Media Services. It allowed more widespread sales and did not give the medical marijuana operators a leg up on becoming gazillionaires.

The Mindful group says it will work to defeat the other initiative, then come back in 2018 to ask voters to approve its less restrictive approach.

This gives Polk an odd ally this year and a foe for the future.

In the meantime, if the looming general election gets any more painful, Arizona will currently let you prescribe yourself some medical marijuana for that chronic headache.